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Harlequin Presents

FLORA
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jungle of desire



JUNGLE OF DESIRE

Flora Kidd

Nothing had really changed, Diana thought miserably. She'd been foolish to hope that lovemaking would resolve the situation more satisfactorily than talking.

Jason, her husband, was a law unto himself. And she knew she wouldn't want him any other way. Uncommitted, untamed, he came and went as he chose and expected her to understand.

"You were supposed to trust me." Jason said. If only she didn't have this fear that one day he might go out and never return!

CHAPTER ONE

THE hotel was large, new and handsome. It was located on a high point of land halfway between the airport and the centre of the city. The main part of the building was seven storeys high and there was an additional wing which was only three storeys high. Some of the rooms faced the valley offering an incomparable view of the city, which nestled in its saucer-like bowl among the mountains of the Andes.

Diana Clarke stood at the window of her bedroom on the fifth floor and watched the glitter of lights sweep across Quito, capital and oldest city of the country of Ecuador. The sun had set, as it always did in that part of the world, at approximately six-fifteen and she had been watching the colours of the mountains change from, sun-gilt daytime green through rose-tinted sunset green to black-shadowed - twilight purple against which the strings and clusters of lights blazed and twinkled.

Suddenly the lights lost their diamond-bright intensity. A cloud had floated across them. It was lower than the fifth floor of the hotel, so Diana was looking down on it. Pale and diaphanous, it wafted like a film of gauze across the city.

Now she felt more than ever as if she were in fairyland, trapped in some high castle tower above the clouds, and the feeling was increased when she looked up and saw the last of the sunset's crimson glow suffuse the snow-mantled slopes of Cotopaxi, the fabled volcano, which flung its white head defiantly against the darkening star-pricked sky. Here and now, she thought dreamily, leaning her head against the cool glass, everything will come right again and I shall live happily ever after.

But even Cotopaxi surrendered to the all-embracing darkness, and became one with the black shadows of night.

The gauzy cloud tore into thin strips and floated away. She became aware that the room behind her had grown dark and turning with a sigh from the window she stepped over to a standard lamp and switched it on.

At once the luxuriously furnished room took on a rosy glow. She went to another lamp by the bed and clicked that on. A long mirror on the wall showed her the reflection of a tall slim young woman with thick waving gold-flecked chestnut hair which curved under smoothly at ear-lobe length, flattering the shape of her head. From high cheekbones her face angled down to a pointed chin which gave an impression of delicacy. Wide-spaced dark-lashed amber-coloured eyes added a shy fawn-like quality while the softness and fullness of the shapely mouth promised warmth and gentleness.

A bit of a puzzle, many had thought on meeting Diana Clarke, and not knowing what to make of that mixture of shyness, other-worldliness and warm sensuality.

Now she stood uncertain what to do next. She had come to Quito six days previously with her father Christopher Farley who, in his position as managing director of a company which made equipment used in the construction of oil rigs, had been combining business with pleasure on a visit to different South American countries where the equipment his company produced was being used. He had come to Ecuador at the invitation of Senor Sancho Suarez, who had interests in one of the big multi-national oil companies which was at present conducting an exploratory survey in the country.

Diana had come with her father because she had need of a change. Finding herself faced with a sudden and alarming decision to make regarding her marital status, she had needed to get away from London to discover how she really felt about her estranged husband Jason Clarke.

She made a little grimace at her reflection and turning away from it went towards the writing table. Pulling out a chair, she sat down, clicked on the reading lamp, slid open a drawer and took out notepaper. While she waited for her father to return from his trip to the jungle of the Oriente, where some of the oil wells were situated, she would write to her Aunt Gertrude and absorbed in the writing she might be able to ignore the niggle of anxiety which was disturbing her because her father was later returning than she had expected. In fact he was almost four hours behind schedule.

The penpoint moved quickly across the pale blue airmail paper, as she described all that had happened since she had arrived in Quito by air. In the few days she had been there she had fallen in love with the city of eternal spring, which is situated almost directly on the Equator but is so high up that it has a temperate spring-like climate.

She had found in the old colonial parr with its narrow cobblestone streets and balconied buildings many reminders of the city's Spanish heritage. Two-storied houses with high white-washed walls and curving roofs made from tiles gone green with age still clustered together to edge narrow sloping lanes. In the Plaza Independencia the cathedral and the government palace still bore the marks of past revolutionary violence, yet the flower beds and shady trees attracted many citizens to linger in there to gossip in the afternoon sunshine or to have their shoes shined.

With Maria, Sancho Suarez' lively wife and nineteen- year-old Ramon, his son, she had taken trips to the Equatorial Monument a few kilometres from Quito and had had her photograph taken with one foot in the Northern Hemisphere and one foot in the Southern Hemisphere. With them also she had visited La Compana, Quito's most famous church. They had followed an old Indian, with a dark immobile face, as he had carried his ornate candle into the church and, to Diana, the interior of the place had come as a shock, for it seemed to her as if a flood of gold had once washed into the church,

leaving everything, statues, pulpits, portrait frames and even the high ceiling, covered with gold plate before it had ebbed.

Yes, she had had a very pleasant time with Maria and Ramon, and today they had been to Sasquili to the Indian market there, driving south through attractive countryside, past Cotopaxi. The small town had been full of Indians who had poured in to barter their goods and buy supplies. They had spread their wares on the cobblestones of the square and the streets, and the whole place had been full of the noise of their chatter as they had exchanged gossip or had shouted to passers-by to come and buy.

Diana flexed the fingers of her hands, spreading them out as she thought of the next sentence. Her fingers, pale and slim, were ringless save for the wedding band of thick solid gold which shone with dull opulence in the light of the lamp.

She was just going to take up the pen to write more when she heard a knock on the door. Laying down the pen, she listened. Again there was a light tap. It couldn't be her father—his knuckle rap was more imperative. Besides, he would have gone into his own room first and would have entered hers through the communicating door.

Rising slowly from the chair, she, went towards the door. Although she liked all she had seen of Ecuador and its people she was naturally cautious by nature and did not wish to open the door to a stranger. Anyone she knew, she was sure, would have approached the reception desk in the lobby first and the clerk on duty would have phoned her room asking if the visitor might come up to see her.

Her fingers closed on the door-knob just as the tap was repeated. Slowly she turned the knob and pulled back the door warily. Her wide-eyed glance encountered the brimming black eyes of Felix, the youngest and smallest of the *mestizo* bellboys.

'Buenas noches, Senora Clarke,' he greeted her politely.

'Buenas noches, Felix,' she replied, hoping he would not continue in Spanish and that she would be able to understand what he had to say.

'There is a guy downstairs who wants to see you,' he said in his careful English which he had picked up from listening to American tourists.

'Did he say who he is?' she asked.

'Como?' He looked puzzled.

'His name. Did he tell you his name?' Frantically she searched in her mind for the Spanish word for name and couldn't think of it.

He shook his head and mischief brimmed again in his big black eyes.

'No. He asked at the desk for the number of your room. The clerk will not give the number until the guy give his name. The guy will not give his name. The clerk is not liking him. The guy sees me watching. He come to me and say he will pay me to come up here and ask you to come and meet him in the bar. You come, *senora*, he pay me.'

He put his head on one side appealingly. Diana stared at him frowning a little as she hesitated. Would it be wise, she wondered, to go and see a man whom the desk clerk had refused to allow upstairs?

'If you don't come, *senora*, that guy going to be plenty mad at me and I not want to be around when he get mad, for he is beeg and strong. You come, *senora, por favor*,' pleaded Felix.

He wanted the money the man had offered, she knew that. But how could she refuse in the face of such an appeal? And she had nothing

to lose. No one could harm her in full view of the people who frequented the bar, where every night a small cabaret performed.

'I come,' she said, and smiled. Immediately Felix's face lit up as he smiled back, showing his big white teeth.

Turning back into the room, she picked up her white handbag, made sure her room key was in it, slung it over her shoulder, and gave one glance at her reflection to make sure her lime green linen suit looked neat. Satisfied that she looked her usual outwardly-poised self, she stepped into the corridor, closed the bedroom door and followed Felix to the lift which would take them down to the ground floor lobby.

The bar, where drinks were served all day, was in a room near the main entrance of the hotel. As usual it was dimly lit, but it was possible to see the faces and shapes of the people who were sitting at the round tables set about a small stage where a group of musicians was performing some erotic Latin-American music.

Felix wended his way blithely through the tables towards the corner farthest away from the door, and Diana followed. He stopped at a table and made sure she was following him. Diana's breath caught in her throat, almost making her choke when she saw the broad back, the wide shoulders, the shaggy collar-length hair of the man sitting at the table. She nearly turned and ran. She did in fact pause in her stride, her hand to her breast where her heart had begun to thump as if she had just been running.

Maybe he wasn't Jason, she cautioned herself. Maybe he was just someone who looked like him from the back view.

By this time Felix was speaking rapidly to the man and pointing in her direction. The man turned. She saw the blunt strong features in profile etched against the glow of the table lamp, saw the distinctive

droop of a lock of hair on to the broad forehead, felt, even at that distance, the shock of his intensely blue stare.

But his glance didn't linger. He recognised her at once, turned back to the boy, plunged a hand into his trouser pocket, brought out a handful of change and handed it over to the outstretched palm. Felix grinned, bowed, said many *gracias* and sped swiftly away, darting among the tables.

Still Diana hesitated and stared at the broad back which was presented to her as if the man didn't care whether she went up to him or not. Shock was having its way with her, making her feel a little sick. How often she had imagined this meeting with Jason who, over twelve months ago, had walked out of their flat in London after accusing her of lack of trust. But never in her wildest flights of fantasy had she thought it would be here in another country, on another continent, here in this enchanted city.

Forcing herself forward, walking on legs which were shaky, she went up to him.

'What are you doing here?' Her voice came out in a bewildered croak.

He placed the glass which he was draining on the table and his glance came upwards slowly to her face. A faint smile crinkled the corners of his eyes.

'Waiting for you,' he replied. 'Why don't you sit down? Take the weight off your feet. You look a little shaky.'

'I am,' she said frankly, and sank gratefully on to the chair which he pulled out from the table. 'You're the last person I expected to see here.'

His eyes narrowed, became slits of gleaming blue between thick bronze-coloured lashes.

'Didn't Chris tell you I was working here?' he exclaimed.

'No. And if he had...' She broke off, suddenly confused, wondering why her father hadn't told her Jason was in Ecuador. Had he believed she might not have come with him?

'You wouldn't have come with him,' drawled Jason, finishing the sentence for her. 'Okay, I get the message.'

'No, no ... that isn't what I was going to say,' she protested. 'But maybe *he* thought that *I* wouldn't have come.'

Again the blue eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled rather mockingly at her.

'Still a bit mixed-up, aren't you?' he scoffed softly. 'All right, let it pass. Can I buy you a drink?'

'What have you been drinking?' she asked.

'A local *poison*—*paico*. It has an anise flavour and isn't bad mixed with lemon juice. But it's quite potent. You'd be better off with something more conventional or a soft drink.'

It was familiar, this interest in what she ate or drank, and for a moment it warmed her, almost disarming her. Then alarms rang. It was all part of the charm of this big rough man to show interest and concern when he wanted to and whatever happened she must not let herself become a victim to that charm again.

'I'd like a Coke, please,' she said coolly, remembering warnings she had been given about the effects of alcohol at this high altitude, and within a few minutes a frosted glass containing the dark brown

bubbly liquid and two straws was being placed before her by a waiter.

'Why are you waiting for me?' she asked, watching Jason light a thin dark cheroot and thinking to herself that the Jason she had known had never drunk much, nor had he smoked.

He gave her a narrowed wary glance, twisted the cheroot to the corner of his mouth and spoke round it.

'To tell you something you're not going to like,' he murmured and she went cold with apprehension.

'It's about Daddy, isn't it?' she guessed. 'He's later than he said he'd be. What's happened?'

Again he eyed her warily, possibly considering how best to phrase what he was going to say or trying to make out whether she could take another shock on top of the one she had just received.

'Tell me, Jason,' she urged him. 'I promise I won't pass out on you or go into hysterics.'

His broad-lipped well-cut mouth dipped at one corner in sardonic appreciation of what she had said.

'Okay, then, this is it, straight from the shoulder. The helicopter which was bringing him back to Puno from the oil wells crashed on landing. He's hurt, but not badly. A touch of concussion, some bruised ribs and possibly a broken arm,' he said crisply.

'Oh, where is he? I must go to him!' She sprang up, panicking a little after all, imagining her father ill and unattended in some fly-ridden makeshift jungle hospital.

Jason grasped her arm and pulled her down into the chair.

'Calm down! He's in good hands in the hospital which is run by the World Health Organisation at Puno. I came as soon as I could from there to tell you. Chris thought you might take the news better from a relative.'

Diana did not miss the ironic emphasis he put on the word relative and she gave him a quick furtive glance. He had picked up his glass and, even while she watched, he swallowed half of his drink. She picked up her glass too and sipped through the straws. The ice-cold liquid soothed her throat and the action of drinking gave her time to calm herself and think up the next question to be asked.

'Can I go to Puno to be with him?' she asked.

He was watching the singer who had just come on to the stage. She was one of the stars of the cabaret, a tall dusky-skinned girl with voluptuous curves swathed in a full-length gown of white which had a sarong-type bodice fitting snugly across her full breasts and revealing her beautifully-moulded chocolate brown shoulders and throat.

'You can go if you want to,' Jason drawled indifferently, tipping ash into the ashtray and picking up his glass to finish his drink,

'When?'

His blue heavy-lidded glance came round to her, lingered on her hair which was gleaming in the lamplight, flicked down to her mouth, seemed to pause there, then drifted slowly downwards and back to the smoking tip of the cheroot. She had the impression that his thoughts were far away from the subject of her father and were concerned solely with his own comforts and his own needs.

'I'll take you there tomorrow, when I've had some sleep,' he replied.

She looked at him closely then. He was thinner than when she had last seen him. His skin had been tanned to an even nut-brown which made his eyes seem bluer, and the top layer of his golden brown hair had been bleached to the colour of pale yellow straw. The contrast between sun- scorched skin and bleached hair was eye-catching and perhaps only she would have noticed the fatigue which hollowed his cheeks and put dark smudges beneath his eyes. As usual he was casually dressed in a navy blue shirt with a carelessly knotted tie, and light fawn pants. A safari-style fawn-coloured jacket was slung over the back of his chair.

'Thank you for coming to tell me,' she said softly, repressing fiercely a sudden urge to reach out and touch his big tanned hand which rested on the table.

He shrugged his shoulders in dismissal of her thanks, glanced down at the empty glass he was holding and signalled to a passing waiter to give an order for another drink. The waiter took away the empty glass and the singer let fly with some haunting throbbing contralto sounds.

'Have you been in Ecuador long?' Diana asked, very conscious suddenly of tension. Jason had never been a talker, had never been given to idle chatter or to the discussion of ideas. He said what he thought or felt concisely and sometimes rudely and he answered questions laconically. Now, once again, she was having to do the talking and fill the void between them with words.

'Ever since the new survey was begun,' he replied.

'When was that?'

'Are you really interested, or are you just making polite conversation?' he countered so acidly that she flinched as if he had struck her.

'I'm interested,' she said, her voice as cool as a freshwater Stream. 'You see, when you didn't come back to London and didn't get in touch with me I wrote to you care of your company.' She saw the satirical lift of his right eyebrow and went on in a rush, defensively, 'I thought that as your wife I had a right to know where you were and what you were doing.'

He didn't reply because the waiter came with his drink. Payment was made and the waiter went off. Jason crushed out the end of his cheroot in the ashtray and sipped some of his drink. Then he studied the liquor in the glass as if it was the most interesting thing in his life just now.

Diana felt anger slowly simmering within her. He wasn't going to explain anything and his silence was forcing her to ask more questions, something which she knew he didn't like.

'I didn't get any reply and I've often wondered if you received the letter,' she said tentatively.

'I did.' Terse, to the point, his answer was unrevealing.

'Then why didn't you write back?' she demanded, feeling pain stab through her as she realised he had deliberately refrained from answering her letter.

'Do you really want to know?' he asked, and raising the glass swallowed the rest of his drink.

'Of course I do! I expect there's some perfectly reasonable explanation why you didn't write, why you've been silent all these months,' she replied stiffly, her throat suddenly aching with tears because nothing had changed. He was still a stranger; a stranger she had loved, or thought she had loved, whom she had married and with whom she had once enjoyed a passionate physical intimacy.

'Oh, sure, perfectly reasonable,' he mocked her accent, and again she felt fresh pain. 'Only you might not think it reasonable when you hear it. I didn't write back because I didn't care to be told you would forgive me for something I'd never done.'

With a few words he had set back the calendar. It was as if time hadn't passed and that they were once again facing each other in the flat in London. Only the poignant twanging of a guitar and the soulful throbbing of the singer's voice, the movement of waiters among the tables and the occasional buzz of conversation from other couples in the room made it different. Jason's attitude hadn't changed, and she reacted to it in the same way.

'Hadn't done?' she exclaimed, her words almost drowned in the applause which greeted the end of the song. She repeated them more loudly and because the applause stopped her voice rang out clearly so that the people at the next table turned to stare at her. Her cheeks suddenly afire at the thought that they might consider her loud-mouthed and indiscreet in her behaviour, she leaned forward and added in a fierce whisper, 'Oh, come on, Jason, that's going too far. You went to Paris to see a woman. You went there at her invitation.'

He leaned back in his chair and gave her a bright mocking glance.

'Did I?' The way he drawled the question should have warned her she had made a mistake. 'How do you know I was invited to go there? Eunice, your dear best friend, couldn't have told you that.'

'I ... er ...' Words deserted her. She had thought she could have told him about the letter she had found among his clothing and which had been signed by a woman called Carol, but her courage failed her when she saw accusation bright and bleak in his eyes and in the way his mouth took on a sceptical twist. 'Never mind how I know,' she parried weakly. 'I know you lied to me and deceived me, destroying my trust in you.'

'Ha!' His crack of laughter brought more attention their way from the people at the next table. 'You don't know what trust is. You never knew. I had to be only a day or two late coming back to you and you'd be asking questions, wanting to know where I'd been, what I'd been doing, whom I'd been sleeping with ...'

'Oh, I never asked you that,' she gasped.

'No, but you implied it,' he jeered bitterly.

'Keep your voice down. Everyone is looking at us.'

'I don't care if they are,' he retorted carelessly.

'You ... you've had too much to drink,' she accused.

'Could be you're right about that if about nothing else,' he agreed with her, and smiled, his slow engaging smile which still had the power to make her legs go wobbly and her heart leap. 'I've been pouring this stuff down for the past hour trying to get up enough courage to face you and tell you about Chris.'

'I don't believe you needed to drink to face me,' she began in protest, and he turned on her, almost snarling.

'It's a habit you have, not believing me, isn't it? But you believed Eunice, you trusted her, and you couldn't believe or trust me. She was your so-called *best* friend. I was only the poor sucker you trapped into marrying you ...'

'I never trapped you!'

'No?' The irony was bitter. The glance of the blue eyes was weary, she could have said disillusioned. She stood up suddenly, knocking against the table so that the glasses quivered and one toppled over.

'I... I can't stand any more of this,' she muttered, and turning, went from the room blindly, scarcely noticing the people she brushed against in her hurry to escape further pain.

In the lobby she followed a group of American tourists who had just returned from some outing and entered the lift with them. Laughing and chattering, they jammed her into a corner and it was only when she asked one of them to press the button for the fifth floor that she noticed Jason was in the lift too. He was leaning against the wall opposite to her, watching her with mocking eyes.

The lift went up smoothly, stopped and some of the tourists stepped out. Leaning in her corner, Diana kept her gaze steady on the panel of numbers above the doors. Three, four, five. The figure five lit up, the lift stopped, the doors slid open. Excusing herself, she pushed through and stepped into the dimly lit, thickly carpeted corridor. As she moved quickly in the direction of her room she heard the doors of the lift close and then the sound of footsteps following her.

'Why have you followed me?' she cried, swinging round to face him. In the dim lighting his face had a coppery sheen and his sun-bleached hair glinted with pale fire. With his strong bold features and blue eyes he could have been a stand-in for the White God who was so revered by the Indians of that part of South America.

'You said you'd like to go to Puno tomorrow and I said I'd take you,' he replied quietly. 'I think I have a right to follow you to your room where we can discuss arrangements.'

She turned away from him and hurried along the corridor, knowing he was keeping up with her, walking with that lazy grace which was so much a part of his attraction. At the door she fumbled with the key at the lock, couldn't turn it and hastily withdrew her hand, when his hand came out to turn the key for her, in case they touched.

The door swung open and she went through to fling her bag on the bed and to swing round again to face him—only to gasp with dismay. He had closed the door and was leaning against it. The coppery hue of his face had changed to a greenish grey, he was frowning and his eyes were closed as if he were in pain.

'Jason, what's the matter?' she asked, going up to him and taking the key from his lax fingers.

His eyes half opened and his grin mocked himself.

'Like you said, I've had too much to drink and I've an awful feeling I'm going to be sick here and now. Do you have a bathroom?'

'Yes, oh, yes. Here.' She opened the bathroom door which was close by the entrance to the room and switched on the light. He lunged away from the door, went straight into the bathroom and slammed that door shut behind him.

Standing once more by the window looking down at the glitter of Quito, Diana tried to ignore the muffled sounds coming from the bathroom. She didn't know whether she wanted to laugh or cry. She supposed she was still suffering from the double shock of seeing Jason so unexpectedly and of hearing the bad news concerning her father. Life was suddenly topsy-turvy and She had no idea of how to make it come right way up again.

How long she stood there, hands to her hot cheeks, watching the clouds drift across the valley, she did not know. She was roused from her reverie by the sound of the bathroom door opening and the flushing noise of the lavatory. She turned from the window and moved back slowly into the room.

Jason came out of the bathroom. He was very pale, his hair was tousled and he was carrying his jacket. He threw the jacket on to the

nearest chair, pulled his tie off and to her astonishment pulled his shirt off over his head. As he tossed the shirt in a crumpled heap on top of the jacket the muscles rippled under the suntanned skin of his bare torso and her breath caught again in her throat as his action wakened memories painfully from their long sleep.

'Are you all right?' she asked, going up to him.

'What's this? Wifely concern?' he mocked, his hands going to the brass buckle of the leather belt which, threaded through slots on the waistband of his pants, held them in place.

'Can I get you anything?' she persisted, ignoring the jibe.

'No, thanks. I'll be fine once I've slept it off.' He gave up trying to unbuckle his belt and sat down suddenly on the edge of the bed. Clutching his head in his hands, he groaned. 'Oh God, I'd forgotten about the change in altitude. Alcohol at this height after being in the lowlands for a couple of weeks doesn't pay off. I guess I've got mountain sickness in a big way.'

Standing in front of him, Diana dithered, torn with a longing to sit down beside him and take him in her arms to comfort him. Then as he leaned over in an attempt to unlace his shoes she realised with more dismay what he intended to do.

'Jason, you can't stay the night here, in this room,' she quavered.

He-raised his head, put a hand to it as if it hurt and said,

'Why can't I? Are you expecting someone else to come?'

The insolence of the question brought red flags of anger flaring into her cheeks.

'No, I'm not,' she retorted hotly. 'But what will the hotel management think if they find out you're spending the night in my room when you're not booked in? I know the desk clerk has already refused to let you come up here.'

'Is that all that's bothering you?' he drawled, and yawned suddenly. He gave up trying to untie his shoelaces, and swung his long legs on to the bed. Lying back against the rolled pillow at the head of the bed he surveyed her with eyes which glimmered blue from beneath eyelids which were already weighted with sleep. 'You can always tell them the truth. You can say your husband turned up unexpectedly. I think you'll find they'll understand and will be glad to charge you double rate for the room instead of single. Right now I'm grateful the bed is a big one and there's room for two of us.'

He sighed deeply, turned his head sideways, closed his eyes and fell asleep at once as if exhaustion had caught up with him.

For a few moments Diana could only stare at his recumbent figure as anger fought with an overwhelming desire to laugh. It was all in keeping with this crazy country, she thought, this cloud-cuckoo land where the oddest events were accepted as normal and commonplace. An hour or so ago she had had no idea that Jason was in Ecuador, yet now he was here, asleep on the bed where she had slept for the past five nights and where she had hoped to sleep tonight.

The familiarity of his posture, the way his ruffled sun-bleached hair fell forward over his forehead, the way the hard firm line of his mouth softened in sleep so that he looked as if he were going to smile, churned up more memories which she had thought she had buried for ever; memories of other times when she had returned to the flat to find him come back from his work and lying on the bed in the same way.

The memories brought pain as their warmth cracked the ice with which she had tried to cover them, breaking it up into sharp splinters which seemed to stab her sensitive heart. Involuntarily she stepped forward to the bed. Her hand went out to push the hair back from his forehead. Then, realising what she had been going to do, she snatched it back.

No, she wasn't going to be caught like that. In sleep Jason might look vulnerable, but she must always remember that he had never let himself be and had guarded his inner self against all attacks with a fierce silent pride. Any softness which appeared when he was asleep was surface softness only. It did not go down deep. He was tough all the way through.

She must be more practical. He would be much more comfortable without his shoes and socks, she decided, and soon she had them off. He would probably be more comfortable without his trousers too, but she doubted she could remove them without waking him.

As she hesitated, her hands hovering above the buckle of his belt, she caught sight of scars on his body curving round from the lower part of his ribs to his back. It looked as if the skin had been ripped open and stitched together again. The scars were still faintly red and they had not been there over twelve months ago.

Why were those scars there? In what accident had he been mauled? Hand to her face, she struggled with new pain because he had been hurt and she had not known, had not been informed and so had been unable to take care of him as was her right and duty as his wife.

The knowledge was another stab at her already lacerated feelings and with a little moan she turned away from the bed to the chest of drawers. In the bottom drawer she found an Indian blanket woven from soft wool in a brightly coloured geometric design. Lifting it out,

she carried it to the bed and laid it over Jason. As if he sensed the extra comfort he sighed again and turned on to his side.

Keep busy, that's the only way to stop feeling, to stop the memories from taking over, Diana warned herself. Going to the bathroom, she found he had cleared up any mess he might have made and she knew a feeling of relief. She washed herself, cleaned her teeth, brushed her hair and went back into the bedroom.

On the writing table lay the unfinished letter to Aunt Gertrude, so she sat down and wrote quickly, telling her aunt about her father's accident, adding that she would let her know more details later. Then she put the letter in an envelope, addressed and stamped it ready to be posted the next day.

After that there was nothing left for her to do except go to bed, so she undressed, slipped into her nightgown and went to the side of the bed which was empty.

She couldn't do it. She couldn't slip under the blanket and be close to Jason while so much which was still unexplained came between the true meeting of their minds. While she distrusted him and while he distrusted her, refusing to let her into the private world of his thoughts and feelings, while he kept on telling her lies, she could not bear to be close to him physically.

Turning away from the bed before she could weaken and change her mind, she caught sight of the big lazy-boy armchair. She could sleep in that and would be quite comfortable because when she leaned back in it the back would become lower and a footrest would come up at the front.

The only problem would be keeping warm because Jason was lying on all the bedclothes and had the only extra blanket over him. Still,

she should be all right in her dressing gown with the light woollen coat she had brought with her to wear on cool Andean evenings.

She turned the chair to face the wide window and left the heavy curtains undrawn. Soon she was settled in her makeshift bed, the lights were out and, because she did not feel sleepy and had many troublesome thoughts, she tried to count the stars, hoping that they would act as a substitute for sheep and help her to fall asleep.

She stared out at the blue-black, light-flushed, star- pricked night. All was quiet up here above the clouds. Only the slight sound of Jason's breathing broke the silence of the room. But even that sound stirred memories. How many times had she lain awake listening to him breathing, feeling the heavenly weight of his body against hers when he had fallen asleep in her arms after they had made love. How many times ...

She jerked her thoughts away from the paths down which they had been wandering and tried to concentrate on thinking about her father. He wasn't badly hurt, Jason had said. Concussion, bruised ribs and a broken arm. And he was in good hands. In this case she had to trust Jason's word as she had trusted him in those lovely carefree days when she had first known him.

Her thoughts wandered in spite of her efforts to keep them under control and the stars blurred before her eyes as she drifted back in time to her first meeting with Jason, which had taken place just over two years ago.

CHAPTER TWO

THEY met at a dinner party given by Christopher Farley to entertain prospective business customers and associates. He liked entertaining, was a good host and, ever since her mother had died in a horse-riding accident when Diana was sixteen years old, his daughter had acted as hostess at his side.

Although shy Diana loved dressing up for such occasions. She was a student of dress design at a London art college and for this particular dinner party she had designed and made herself a new gown. It was of a soft clinging material the same amber colour as her eyes, close-fitting, flaring out only to fullness below the knee, emphasising the maturing curves of her body and the smooth whiteness of her skin.

The dress made her look older than her twenty-one years and she wore her shoulder-length gold-flecked hair fluffed out at the ends and in a fluffy fringe across her brow. She placed a slender golden chain from which hung a jade pendant round her neck and hung matching jade ear-rings from her lobes. She looked, although she did not know it, cool, self-assured, tempting yet untouchable, a golden challenge to the eyes of any roving male who happened to be passing through.

When she arrived at the club in Mayfair where the dinner was being held she went for a few minutes to the ladies' room to make sure her hair was smooth. She looked round at the other women who were there hoping to see her friend Eunice Vinton, whose brother Paul worked for Christopher Farley. Paul was often invited to these dinners and he brought his sister as his partner. But there was no sign of Eunice's sleek dark head and vivacious face, so Diana went out and made her way to the room where the reception was being held.

She found her father talking to a tall man whom she judged to be about thirty-one or two, whose golden hair glinted under the electric light with the brassiness of pagan gold. His wide shoulders looked as

if they might burst the seams of the black dinner jacket he was wearing. Above the white collar of his shirt his tanned face had a hard-bitten look about it the lines in the lean cheeks being deeply carved. His mouth was generously curved, and as she approached he laughed suddenly, throwing his head back to *show white* straight-edged teeth, completely uninhibited in his appreciation of Chris Farley's quiet wit.

'I'd like you to meet Jason Clarke, my dear,' her father said, drawing her forward. 'As you might guess, he works for an oil company and is at present working on a survey which his company is doing off the north-eastern coast of this country. This is my daughter Diana, Clarke.'

A big hand engulfed hers. An attractively drawling voice murmured provocatively,

'Diana was a huntress, if I remember a story I read at school correctly.'

'And Jason was a rover,' she retorted lightly.

'Until he found what he wanted,' he replied, and the direct blue blaze of his eyes held hers for a small moment of silence.

'Where do you belong?' she asked, trying to maintain a cool light-hearted facade but feeling herself quivering from head to foot, unable to pull her glance away from his or her hand from his grasp.

'Wherever I happen to find myself,' he replied tauntingly, and his eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled at her, a smile which began slowly and made her feel as if she were the only woman he had ever smiled at.

'Oh, that isn't what I mean,' she replied, confused by *the* strange feelings which were sweeping over her. 'You obviously don't come from this country, so where do you come from?'

'I'm not too sure about that,' he countered, still looking down at her.

'Well, you must have been born somewhere, brought up somewhere,' she replied tartly.

'I grew up and went to school in Texas, will that do?' he said, and just then Eunice and Paul came up. They had apparently met Jason before. The conversation became more general, Diana was introduced to more people by her father and separated from Jason, yet she was aware of him across the crowded room and all through dinner her glance sought out the shaggy blond-streaked hair, the blunt rough-hewn features, the big shoulders, the difference-which was him.

When dinner was over and people were lingering to talk in little groups she felt a hand touch her bare arm and turned to find him beside her. Of Eunice and Paul there was no sign, yet she knew he had sat with them all through dinner.

'It's just my bad luck to meet you on my last night in town for a while. Is there anywhere we can be alone?' he asked quietly.

His direct approach took her by surprise. Most of the men she knew were much more devious in their attempts to be alone with her and so were much more easily foiled in their attempts.

'I... I don't know,' she managed to say weakly.

He tugged with an impatient hand at the bow tie he was wearing, pulled it free, put it in his jacket pocket and undid the top two buttons

of his shirt. His smile was a white curve in his sun-beaten face as he noted her wide-eyed stare and it mocked himself.

'I'm nor used to wearing this sort of rig-out,' he explained. 'Not used to this kind of affair either.' He glanced round the high-ceilinged room with its delicately carved wooden panelling. 'I guess this place is pretty old,' he observed.

'Only eighteenth century. It was once the home of a duke,' she replied. 'If you're not used to this kind of affair why did you come?'

'Your father invited me. I like him,' he said simply, then added brusquely, 'Let's quit making small talk and go for a walk.'

Diana glanced about her wildly, knowing that she was on the verge of losing her precious independence of mind and body. To go walking with him would be disastrous.

'I'll have to tell my father. You see ...'

'I'll tell him,' he interrupted her. 'You get your coat. We won't be coming back.'

Her resistance, which was only token, collapsed. As if in a dream she collected her black velvet coat, slung it about her shoulders and went with him into the still April night. Street lamps shed pools of light on the pavement and glinted on Georgian sash windows and semi-circular fanlights above delicately panelled doors of the neat brick buildings which they passed.

Hand in hand they walked—how far, she neither knew nor cared. It was enough to be with him.

'It's getting late. I have to go,' he said suddenly. 'I'll take you home first.'

A prowling taxi seemed to appear, from nowhere. In the darkness of the back seat, she told him the address and heard him repeat it to the driver before closing the sliding window which separated the driver's seat from the passengers' seats.

'How far is it to your home?' Jason asked, leaning back close beside her, turning to her so that she felt the warmth of his breath on her cheek and the thrust of his knee against her thigh.

Without waiting for her to reply he pushed an arm behind her shoulders and gathered her against him. She put up no resistance but went willingly into his arms. leaning against him, she raised her face to his and whispered,

'It takes about fifteen minutes from here.'

He kissed her then. His lips were firm and cool, moving against hers, savouring the sweetness they found there, withdrawing slowly, tantalisingly, to brush against her cheek, only to return to the first sweetness and demand more.

Diana had been kissed by several young men and had admitted to being disappointed in the whole process because none of the kisses she had received had lit any spark of response within her. But Jason's kiss was different, just as he was different from those other young men. His kiss was like a key to a door which, until this moment she had kept locked against hopeful invaders. It was an invasion which she welcomed and wanted, so that her lips parted beneath the pressure of his and at once her whole body became open house to delicious tingling sensations as she felt his hand slide down over her breast to the curve of her waist and thence to her hand which he lifted to press against his chest.

The feel of his hard pulsing body beneath her finger-tips was another new experience. Her hand became adventurous, slid under the edge

of the partially unbuttoned shirt opening and touched with a sense of wonder the firm hair-sprinkled skin of his chest. Then her hand was trapped between the hardness of his chest and the softness of her own breasts as he held her closer, closer, much closer as if he could not get enough of her.

The taxi slowed down to take the turn into the street where she lived when Jason's lips left hers and trailed down over her cheek to caress the vulnerable place below her ear.

'I want you, little huntress. Is it possible?' he murmured against her skin.

The words shocked her back into the reality of where they were and who he was. She retreated instinctively, protecting herself too late against invasion.

'But we've only just met. I hardly know you. I don't love you.'

'No?' He drawled the negative ironically and moved away from her, putting space between them, and quite suddenly and contrarily she wanted to reach out and cling to him. 'I'd like to marry you. Would you like to be married to me?'

'Yes.' The answer came readily in a whisper from between her bruised lips as she acknowledged with a swinging upward feeling of joy that she was in love with him and wanted him as much as he wanted her.

'Then we'll do it next time I'm in London, which should be in three weeks. Is that long enough to make the arrangements?'

'Yes, oh, yes ... but you don't mean it,' she said hesitantly. 'You'll forget.'

'Think so? That shows how little you know me. When I want something I go all out to get it. I want you, have done ever since I saw you walk into that room, so we'll be married about three weeks from now.'

He leaned forward, opened the door of the taxi and stepped out on to the pavement, turning to help her out. The little chivalrous gesture seemed out of keeping with his blunt vigorous speech and masterful behaviour, but it disarmed her and putting her hand in his she stepped out. He swung her round to face him and holding her in the circle of his arms studied her upturned face for a moment before kissing her again, differently, almost reverently.

'I'll be seeing you, golden girl,' he murmured softly, 'so be ready.'

He waited by the taxi until she had opened the front door. She stepped into the house and turned to look back at him. He raised a hand in a brief wave, entered the taxi and was driven away.

Next morning at breakfast her father considered her over the top of his *Telegraph* and said drily,

'I notice Jason Clarke wasted no time in getting to know you better. I hope he behaved himself.'

Diana helped herself to marmalade from a dish of Wexford glass and spread the thick-cut orange stuff on a slice of golden toast before replying.

'Did you expect him not to?' she enquired.

'Well, he's a bit of a rough diamond and tends to be rather impatient of our little civilities and conventions. Not exactly what you would call a domesticated beast. Now don't run away with the idea that I don't like him—I do, and I have the utmost admiration for his

astounding capacity for hard work, but he's a, tough character. Untamed would be a good word for him.'

Diana studied his fine-boned elegant face, took a deep breath and plunged.

'He wants to marry me.' .

Chris Farley's dark eyebrows went up. His brown eyes widened.

'Good lord,' he exclaimed. 'Why?'

Having been motherless for four years Diana had grown into the habit of sharing her problems with her father, finding in him an interested listener who had often offered sound gentle advice which she had sometimes followed. But now something within her, some desire to keep what had happened last night in the taxi private and inviolate, stopped her from telling him about the sexual attraction which had blazed between Jason and herself within a matter of minutes.

'I think he likes me,' she replied, and was glad she had learned not to blush as she met the ironical glance her father gave her. She had to admit that 'like' was a milk-and-water word to describe the passionate intensity of Jason's desire.

'It seems a precipitate way of going about marriage to me, but it's in keeping with what I know about him. I gather you accepted his proposal?' said Chris in his cool, unemotional way.

Diana could hardly tell him either that there had been no proposal as such, so she just muttered,

'Yes.'

'And when is the ceremony to take place? I assume it will be a civil affair. I can't imagine our untamed one wanting to bother with all the ritual of a church wedding.'

'Three weeks from now, he said. When he's next in town. Daddy, you don't mind, do you?' she said urgently.

'I don't suppose it will change anything if I do mind,' he replied with a smile. 'And I suppose too I should be glad that he's decided to make everything legal, but I can't help thinking you're not ready for marriage, my dear.'

'I'm twenty-one,' she argued defensively.

'I wasn't thinking in terms of age, I was thinking in terms of attitude. You've led a comparatively sheltered life and Clarke has knocked around the world a lot, and not always in the best of company. Personally I think he's too much for you to handle. In a year or two, perhaps ...'

'I... I don't think we could wait a year, either of us,' said Diana quickly, recalling the urgency of the embraces which had taken place between herself and Jason in the taxi.

Her father considered the slight flush which had tinged her cheeks.

'Mmm, like that, is it?' he observed thoughtfully. 'Then all I can say is do it with my blessing. I suppose that as your father I should find out something about his background. Would you like me to do that? I daresay his company won't mind giving me some information, since we've done business together.'

'Yes, please. And Daddy, please don't tell anyone... yet. You see, it's possible that he might...' She broke off, not wanting to voice her fears that Jason hadn't been sincere in suggesting marriage to her.

'Might not turn up?' finished her father on a note of enquiry. 'Sounds to me as if you don't trust him all that much, which isn't a good start.'

'It isn't that. It's just that I'd feel such a fool if everyone, all my friends and Aunt Gertrude too, were expecting me to be married and then it all fell through. You do understand why I want to keep it a secret, don't you?'

He folded the newspaper, tucked it under his arm and stood up. As he passed her he stopped to flick her cheek with an affectionate finger.

'I think I do. It's a question of your pride being hurt. Distrust and pride—you should beware of both, my dear. But I'll keep your secret, never fear. Just let me know when it's happened, hmm?'

Never had Diana known three weeks to pass so slowly. March went out and April came in, bringing cool sunny weather instead of the usual soft warm rain. Daffodils and wallflowers bloomed in the parks. Buds swelled on chestnut trees and a few leaves unfurled. Grass turned green and began to grow. The art college term came to an end. Only one more term and she would be qualified.

True to his word, Chris Farley unearthed some information about Jason and brought it to her. It was cold statistical stuff, the sort that some companies keep filed on their employees. It told them that Jason was thirty-two years of age, was single, had attended school in Houston, Texas and had worked for the company since he had left college. The only surprising snippet was that his maternal grandfather had been William D. Rowe, who had been a vice-president of the oil company for which Jason now worked.

'Well, at least you know that he isn't married already,' Chris said drily, 'and he had an influential grandfather.'

But all that mattered to Diana was that there had been truth in the little Jason had told her about himself. She counted the days since he had left. Twenty had passed. Tomorrow he would come or she could start to expect him.

Instead of Jason, though, her father's aunt Gertrude Farley came to stay two weeks before going on to visit friends on the continent. Once a chorus girl in the London stage, she was a tall angular woman whose fine-boned face was still beautiful. Normally Diana enjoyed the visits of her great-aunt, who lived most of the time in a cottage in Cornwall which had been left to her by one of her many admirers, but this time she often found her mind wandering as she listened to one of Gertrude's long meandering stories about her past.

Five days past the deadline, and there was no word from Jason, no sign of him. Her spirits began to sink. She'd been taken for a ride. He had had no intention of coming back to marry her. He had found someone else, less innocent perhaps, but more willing to give him what he wanted without marriage.

It was the Wednesday of Easter week and she was sitting with Aunt Gertrude, lingering over a late breakfast when the doorbell rang. She went to answer it and found Jason on the doorstep his arms full of daffodils.

'Hi,' he said, and stepped in without being invited, thrust the flowers at her and kissed her hard on the mouth. 'I guess you were thinking I'd forgotten you?'

He was wearing a dark blue suit, which had a safari-style jacket, over a light blue shirt. The close fit of his clothing seemed to emphasise his masculinity so that Diana felt desire leap within her, turning her giddy.

'Guess I was,' she murmured, lifting her face to him, deliberately inviting him to kiss her again, and the flowers were crushed between them as he caught her against him and kissed her.

'Ahem.' Gertrude's cough was discreet but effective. They pulled away from each other and turned to stare at her dazedly. 'And who are you, young man?' Gertrude asked in her most supercilious way as she looked Jason up and down.

'Jason Clarke, ma'am,' he replied, going over to her his right hand outstretched. 'Who are you?'

'Gertrude Farley, Diana's great-aunt.'

Jason glanced back at Diana, then at Gertrude again, his eyes narrow and shrewd.

'I see a likeness,' he said. 'If Diana: looks like you by the time she's your age I guess I won't have any regrets about her being my wife.'

Gertrude was obviously gratified by the implied compliment, but her surprise overrode her gratification.

'Your wife?' she exclaimed. 'Are you two getting married?'

'That's so,' Jason grinned. 'By special licence at two this afternoon. It took me a few days to organise it—that's why I couldn't be here before. I didn't want...' He broke off to turn to Diana and his eyes smiled down at her. 'I didn't dare see you again until it was all set up,' he explained softly.

'This afternoon? But Jason, I can't...'

'Sure you can,' he murmured, stroking her cheek with strong fingers.

'Diana, why didn't you tell me?' demanded Gertrude.

'Because she wasn't sure,' Jason answered quickly for her. 'You see, I'm a few days late turning up and I guess she was thinking the worst of me.'

'Diana, does Chris know?' Gertrude was being protective.

'Yes, I told him the day after Jason asked me.'

'Then how long have you two known each other?' Gertrude was obviously puzzled and a little hurt to think she had been kept out of a family secret.

'For years and years.' Again it was Jason who answered and laughter brimmed in his eyes as he winked at Diana. 'But we didn't find each other until a few weeks ago. I hope you'll come and see us tie the knot this afternoon, Aunt Gertrude.'

'I... er...' Gertrude, who was usually so quick, seemed at a loss for words. Then gathering herself together she said severely, 'I think you're very foolish, young man, getting married in a rush like this.'

'Maybe I am. Love makes fools of us all sooner or later, so I'm told,' replied Jason good-naturedly.

'Well, I think I should warn you that Diana isn't ready for marriage. She's too young, too naive. She doesn't know the meaning of love. She needs wooing.'

To Diana's surprise Jason nodded in agreement.

'I appreciate your concern, ma'am,' he said gravely. 'Only the way I do things the wooing is going to come after the wedding.'

Gertrude stared at him closely, her brown eyes assessing. He stared back, not at all abashed by her survey of him. Then she smiled.

'In that case, I think I'll come this afternoon,' she said. 'Have you made any arrangements for a honeymoon?'

'I'm afraid I haven't had time,' he replied.

'Then you must go to Cornwall, use my cottage while I'm away. I insist.'

'But, Aunty, Jason ...' Diana began to panic as she realised how little time was left.

'Don't you want to marry me?' Jason swung round to face her and she met the blue blaze of his eyes, felt the strong pull of his desire for her.

'Oh, yes, I want to,' she whispered, feeling giddy again with the longing to feel his lips on hers, his hands caressing her body, coaxing it to respond. 'I want to very badly.'

'Then all you have to do is put your hand in mine and walk out of here to the register office this afternoon,' he replied softly, and once more the daffodils were crushed between them as he pulled her into his arms.

The honeymoon, as far as Diana was concerned, was a dream come true. The weather was warm and sunny so that they were able to spend their days out of doors, walking hand in hand along the narrow beach beside the sounding surf or chasing each other across the grassy sward which crowned the cliff to fling themselves down in the windy, daisy- sprinkled grass and turn breathless and laughing to each other,- mouths seeking blindly, hands eager to explore and touch.

There was so much they had to find out about each other, although by the end of the week it seemed to Diana that Jason had found out far more about her than she had about him, because she did most of the talking. When it was his turn he preferred kisses to words and one would lead to another until Diana forgot the questions to which she thought she should have answers as passion erupted in her and overflowed.

'But you must have some family,' she said one day when, sated with lovemaking, they lay side by side on the grass. From far below came the hollow boom of the sea washing into a cave. Nearby a bumblebee, thinking summer had come, buzzed busily. High above wispy white clouds hung in the blue sky and occasionally a gull would soar up on a current of air, then glide sideways down to the sea beyond the edge of the cliff.

'Why must I?' Jason teased her lazily.

'Because everyone has to have a mother and father, silly,' she mocked, and rolled over on to her stomach so that she could see him. At once a pagan thrill of possession tingled through her at the sight of his broad chest left bare by his unbuttoned shirt, by the taut curve of his throat and jaw, by the glimmer of his blue eyes between their short thick lashes as he watched the gull soar up again.

'I had a father once,' he said slowly. 'He was English. He was born in the north of England, in Lancashire. I have cousins there.'

Diana was very still, her face cupped on her hands her elbows dug into the green turf as she held her breath almost because at last he had decided to tell her something about his family.

'You said once,' she prompted softly. 'What happened to him?'

'He died in the Ecuadorian jungle. He was a geo- physicist and was working on an exploratory survey for oil which was financed by the company I'm working for now. He was working there when he met my mother. She was visiting the country with her parents—her father was a big- shot in the oil company. They were married in Quito and made their home there for a while. I was born there. That's why, when you asked me where I belonged, I wasn't sure how to answer. My father was British, my mother American and I'm Ecuadorian by birth.'

'How long did you live in Ecuador?'

'Until I was eight, then Dad received some sort of promotion.' His mouth twitched with amusement. 'I think what really happened was that my mother decided it was time I received the sort of education a grandson of William D. Rowe should have and she pulled a few strings so that Dad could be more or less permanently based in Houston. But he had the wanderlust. Any chance that came up he went off, exploring again. Back he went to Ecuador to see how the tests were going. He was killed in a flash fire at a confirmation well when a gas surge in the tubing caused the well to blow.'

'How old were you when he was killed?' she asked.

'Twelve. Mother was very shaken up when he was killed.' He paused. 'She died about two years later of an obscure form of cancer,' he added in a low voice.

'Were you brought up by your grandparents?'

'No. I went to live with my mother's brother, Bill. He's now a vice-president of the company. I wasn't the easiest teenager in the world to bring up.' She saw his teeth glint as he grinned. 'Uncle Bill heaved one big sigh of relief when I decided to leave college and go into the oil business.' Again he paused and watched the seagull. The

expression on his face was wistful as if he longed to be like the bird, free to soar and glide, to wander the wide spaces of the world. 'I'm like my father. I have the wanderlust too,' he said.

Diana, tired of propping up her head, lay down on her side and rested her head with its wind-tangled mop of chestnut hair on his shoulder. She was happy, fully content because he was there with her, Jason the wanderer who had given up his freedom to marry her.

'We'll have to leave here tomorrow,' he said coolly.

'Oh. Why?' She raised her head again.

He turned to face her, propping his head on one hand.

'I have to fly north, go back to work.'

She had never looked beyond the honeymoon, had never thought or planned for the time after it, she had been too caught up in the web of love. Possibly she had had some hazy idea that they would set up house together like other couples did, in a London suburb. Certainly she hadn't expected to be deserted immediately.

'Can I come with you?'

'No.' The answer was quite firm.

'Why not?'

'Because it isn't possible.'

'Then what am I going to do?' she wailed, suddenly cold with apprehension at being left by herself.

'Whatever you were doing before we married,' he replied practically. 'Carry on with that part of your life which has nothing to do with me.'

Get your degree. Get that job you were telling me about that you want to do. Don't let being married to me ever stop you from doing what you want to do ...'

'But, Jason, I want to be where you are always. I want to be there when you come back from your work every day, not just every three weeks.'

His eyes were dark with some emotion and the hand which touched her cheek and went on to stroke the hair back from her ear was gentle, although it still had the power to make her quiver in response.

'You're very sweet,' he murmured, then frowned as if he was having some difficulty in finding a suitable way to explain. 'But you know I can't take you with me to an oil rig.'

'I could stay on the shore—somewhere near there. I know a girl who's married a driller. They have a house at Peterhead.'

'No. I won't be there long enough for it to make it worth your while giving up your college work to come up there. For the time being it will be best if you stay in London, find an apartment there and I'll come to you whenever I can.'

Diana was disappointed. What fun would there be in looking for a flat without him? How could she choose furnishings and fabrics for curtains if she knew nothing of his taste? How could she make a home without him being there?

'Oh, Jason, I don't want you to go away,' she cried out of her selfishness, her possessiveness. 'Couldn't you get a job which would keep you in one place?'

He sat up abruptly, turning his back on her, picking a long grass to chew at. She stared at the tautness of the blue shirt across the slope of

his shoulders at the way the blond-streaked hair spiked over the collar at the back.

'Not yet. I'm not ready.' He spoke in a tough terse way as she imagined he spoke when issuing orders to the men who worked under his supervision. 'Maybe one day. But not here, not in this country.' He paused, then added in a strangely muffled voice, 'Don't try to tie me down, little huntress. It won't work if you do.'

'But if you don't want to stay with me, make a home, why did you marry me?' she cried forlornly as all her most cherished hopes came crashing down.

He turned his head. Slowly his glance ranged over her; over the long jean-clad legs, the carelessly buttoned blouse. The glance stripped her of all her defences, made every nerve quiver in anticipation so that when he moved to lean over her and she felt the hardness of his thigh against hers, smelt the tang of his skin and heard him murmur, 'I think you know why. I couldn't help myself,' she was ready and aching for the touch of his hand which cupped her breast, for the thrust of his mouth against hers, and found an echo of his words in her mind. She couldn't help herself either.

They returned to London next day and stayed the night in her father's house. Jason left for the north the day after and, subduing the desolation which threatened to overwhelm her once he had left, Diana set about searching for a flat.

It was her friend Eunice who put her in touch with someone who had a small one-bedroomed flat on a second floor of an old house near the river in Chelsea, and Diana was grateful to her, although she sensed that both Eunice and Paul were a little dismayed by her swift secret marriage to Jason. Neither of them made any comment, they were too good-mannered to do that, but they received the news in a subdued way and did not offer her any congratulations.

She wrote to Jason telling him the address of the flat and began to search for furniture. By the end of a fortnight she had it partially furnished with a double bed and two chests of drawers, a table and two chairs and huge bulbous cushions which she piled on the floor of the living room to serve as extra seats.

One day, returning from college, she went into the bedroom and found Jason there asprawl on the bed, fast asleep. Her reunion with him had been ecstatic, had lasted a week, and then he had returned north. During the next few months a pattern emerged—two to three weeks apart, a week together. When he went away she longed for him desperately for about twenty-four hours, then her classes at college and later, when she had qualified, her work in the small company which made exclusive designs in women's clothing claimed her attention and she was able to survive until his return.

Absence from each other made them so glad to be with each other that they rarely quarrelled, and if they did the disagreements lasted only a short time, often dissolving in shared laughter or in lovemaking. During Jason's brief visits Diana learned odd unrelated details about him; that he had a passion for serious music so that many of their evenings were spent at the Festival Hall or the Albert Hall; that he was extravagant with his money and had a liking for luxury both in furnishings for the flat and in the gifts he bought for her; that he never wore pyjamas.

When he was away she spent some of her spare time with Eunice, who lived not far away. Often when she was there other friends would drop in, including Paul, Eunice's brother. But when Jason was home Diana did not see any of her friends at all, although he liked to go and visit her father. It was enough for her to have him there. She wanted no one else when he was around.

She supposed she would never have questioned their way of life together and apart if it hadn't been for Eunice who, after one of Jason's brief visits, said,

'Don't you wonder what he does when he's away from you?'

'He works, silly, very hard,' Diana retorted lightly.

'I wasn't thinking of that,' mused Eunice. 'Supposing he has some time off and can't get down to London to see you. What does he do then?'

'Saves all his kisses for me.' Again Diana retorted lightly, but the damage had been done, and next time Jason returned home she questioned him so closely about his activities that he turned on her and teased her for being a jealous wife. Then he had dropped, with apparent carelessness, a warning.

'Don't become too possessive, little huntress, or next time I might not come back.'

And of course the next few weeks had been hell as she wondered whether he would return or not. Noticing her lack of spirits, Eunice invited her round one evening to her flat for a meal.'

'To cheer you up,' she said in her vivacious way. 'That husband of yours has it all his own way, doesn't he? All the pleasures of marriage and none of the responsibilities, and you let him get away with it.'

'That isn't the way either Jason or I look at it,' replied Diana, then she added quietly, 'Why don't you and Paul like him, Eunice?'

'What gives you the idea that we don't?' parried Eunice easily.

'Some of the things you say about him.'

'Well, if you must know, I don't think he's the right partner for you, and it's because of him that Paul is so unhappy.'

'I don't understand.'

'Don't you? Don't you know that Paul has been in love with you ever since he first met you; that he was waiting hopefully, patiently, for you to return his love? Imagine how he felt when that sailor turned up and married you out of hand as cool a bit of piracy as any I've ever seen.. Eunice broke off with a vicious hiss.

'Jason isn't a sailor,' defended Diana, taken aback by her friend's savagery. 'Why do you call him that?'

'Because I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he didn't have a wife in every port, as they say."

'But I'm his wife, his only wife,' exclaimed Diana, looking puzzled.

'Oh, Diana, you're so naive! For wife, read woman.'

'You mean ... you're daring to say ... that Jason ... oh, what a dreadful thing to say about him! He isn't like that. I'd know if he was.'

'Would you?' countered Eunice, 'I doubt it. He has you so mesmerised you'd never think to ask him why sometimes he's a few days late returning to you or where he goes on his way from the north to here.'

'Eunice, if you value my friendship you'll not say any more!' Diana found she was suddenly terribly angry. 'I trust Jason.'

'Then more fool you,' sniped Eunice, her dark eyes snapping. Then with a sudden change of tone and altitude she moved from her chair and came to sit beside Diana on the sofa. 'Can't you see, it's because I'm your friend, because I care about you and your future happiness

that I'm telling you this? If only you'd told me he'd asked you to marry you! If only you hadn't kept it a secret then I could have warned you about him, told you what a heartless calculating exploiter of women he is ...' Eunice's voice seemed to fail her. She buried her face in her hands. Diana stared at her, biting her lip, recalling that Eunice had met Jason before she had, could have felt the effects of his charm before she had, could have ... Her mind shied from further speculation about any relationship there might have been between her friend and her husband.

'Thank you for telling me now, Eunice,' she said in a cold little voice which expressed exactly how she felt, cold as if ice was slowly sealing up her heart. 'Let's talk about something else. When are you going to Paris? You must be quite excited because your boss has asked you to represent him.'

Eunice raised her head, smiled a little wanly and touched Diana's hand.

'You're such a shy, gentle person, Di, I'd hate to see you hurt,' she murmured. 'As for Paris, I go tomorrow for a week. I'll phone you soon as I'm back and tell you all about it.'

A week later Jason returned three days behind his usual schedule. He seemed more tired than normal and very taciturn. As always Diana was so glad to see him that she asked no questions. As long as he was there, big and vital, cradling her in his arms in the tangle of their bed, she didn't want to question him.

Late next morning she was roused by the jangle of the phone bell. Jason was so deeply asleep that he didn't hear it. Slipping out of bed, she pulled on the pretty lace-trimmed negligee he had brought her the previous evening, went into the hall and picked up the receiver. Eunice spoke on the other end of the line.

'Hello. Thought I'd let you know I'm back. How about coming over for tea this afternoon and I'll tell you all about it. Paul will be popping in when he's finished at the office.'

'Sorry, Eunice, not today. Jason is home.'

There was a slightly strained silence from the other end of the line. Diana could hear Eunice's breath quivering.

'Oh,' said Eunice at last, rather flatly. 'So he's back, is he? Has he told you about his little fling in Paris?'

'Paris?' Diana frowned and at that moment caught sight of a label on Jason's battered leather valise which lay where he had dropped it when he had entered the flat. The words Air France seemed to leap out at her. She fingered the silky softness of the black negligee. Yes, its design spelt Paris, and she should have noticed.

'Yes,' Eunice's voice was going on, 'I saw him at the airport. He was with the sweetest little blonde you ever did see. She was swinging on his arm, kissing him goodbye.'

'You must have been mistaken.' Diana found she was trembling. 'It must have been someone else.'

'You don't really believe there's anyone else who looks like Jason, do you?'

'Most people have a double somewhere, so I've been told,' Diana countered lightly.

'Oh, no, it was Jason, big and bold as ever, like a lion untamed. Anyway, why don't you bring him round to tea with you and I can tell him to his face I saw him? It might be interesting to see his reaction.'

'No, no, thank you, Eunice. I'll ask him myself. Goodbye for now.'

Diana set the receiver down slowly. Eunice's description of Jason was apt. He had lion-like attributes, shaggy golden-brown hair, big shoulders, a graceful loping walk. He appeared now in the doorway of the bedroom, a bath towel draped round his waist and thighs. His hair was ruffled, his eyes were sleepy and his bare torso gleamed in the dimness of the hallway.

'Who was that?' he asked.

'Eunice,' she replied, and he made a face. 'She's invited us to tea.'

'I'm glad to say I can't make it,' he replied with a wicked grin. 'I've only a few hours here today, and there's a lot I want to say to you in that time ...'

'Perhaps if you hadn't spent so much time in Paris we'd have had more time together,' she cut in sharply. 'Why did you go there?'

'To buy you that,' he pointed to the negligee, 'and to get you some perfume. I didn't have a chance to give it to you last night.'

Turning to his bag, he bent over it, unstrapped it and began to rummage through it, tossing out soiled clothing on to the floor.

'You don't really expect me to believe you went there just to buy me things, do you?' she said, still sharp, and he gave her a wary glance.

'I had business there too,' he replied coolly. 'Here it is.' He held up a package. 'The real stuff. What every woman wants.'

He offered her the beribboned carton. She glanced at the label and knew it had cost a lot of money, like all his other gifts.

'I don't want it,' she said stiffly. 'You can't buy my silence with gifts any longer.'

He went very pale. She saw the whiteness of bone through skin as his jaw muscles tightened. He tossed the expensive package down as if it were worthless and came to squat before her, completely unconcerned that the air in the hallway was cool and he was practically nude. It was something she had always liked about him—this naturalness, his lack of inhibition with regard to clothing.

'What's wrong, sweetheart?' he asked, and the gentle concern in his voice was almost her undoing. She kept her glance down on her hands which were gripping each other in her lap.

'I don't think you're telling me the truth. I think you went to Paris to see ... a ... another woman.'

'Jealous again?' he queried, softly scoffing, and put his hands on her knees. They slid up the soft silky stuff which covered her thighs, and revulsion tore through her. She leaned back as far away from him as she could.

'Don't touch me. I couldn't bear it!' she flared.

Jason sprang back as if he had been hit by a hot cinder and lifted to his feet in a smooth lithe movement.

'You didn't seem to mind last night,' he remarked drily. 'Why the change?' His glance went to the phone and his mouth twisted. 'No, don't tell me, I can guess. That spiteful little bitch ...' He broke off, looked at her with hard eyes and added in a cold crisp voice, 'I've told you why I went to Paris. Can't you accept my word for it? Don't you trust me?'

'No, not any more. I don't think I can,' she whispered.

He turned away from her, went along the hall and into the bathroom. The slamming of the door seemed to shake the building and it expressed his reaction perfectly.

Numb with misery, Diana crouched in the chair. She couldn't believe it had happened. Jason had lied to her and he expected her to accept his lie.

Her glance went to the pile of dirty shirts he had brought home to be washed. Moving like a robot she began to pick them up. A folded piece of paper fell from the pocket of one of them. She picked it up, intending to throw it into the valise, then ugly suspicion took over. Before she realised it she was unfolding the paper and was staring down at the rather childish handwriting, reading the brief note. It began abruptly.

'Jason, please come to me. I need help. I'm in a bad way. If you have any feelings at all you'll come as soon as you can to Paris, to the above address. You always said you'd come if I asked you. Whenever, wherever, you said. Well, now is the time. You're the only one I can ask, so please come. All my love, Carol.'

The note fluttered from her hand to the floor. She dropped the shirts too as if they were contaminated. Now there was no doubt in her mind. He had been to Paris to see a woman, whose name was Carol.

In the kitchen she busied herself preparing breakfast, turning up the transistor radio loudly so that the sound of the music being played over it drowned all thought. The table was set, the grapefruit halves were cut and sugared, the scrambled eggs were golden and fluffy in the pan when Jason came in.

He went straight to the radio and switched it off, then took his place at the table. He was wearing the dark blue suit he had worn when they had been married and a blue shirt made his eyes look bluer.

With a strange little ache Diana noticed that he still couldn't tie his tie properly. The knot was too wide and too loose for the space between the collar points of his shirt.

Then jealousy because some other woman had possibly seen him like this, freshly bathed and shaved, his hair gleaming gold, his skin taut and smooth, flared up inside her like green fire.

'Jason, will you please tell me the truth about why you went to Paris,' she burst out.

'I've told you the truth—I went there on business. That should be enough, but since you're having difficulty in accepting it I'll expand it a little. It was family business,' he said curtly, and picking up a spoon he began to lift out the pale succulent segments of grapefruit from the cup-like skin which held them.

'Don't you think that as your wife I could be told what the family business was?' she tried more diplomatically.

He raised his eyes and considered her. Never had she known him look at her in such a hostile way, as if he found her lacking in some important quality.

'No, I don't,' he replied.

'Why not?' She was cut to the quick.

'Because you wouldn't understand if I did. You're ... you're too—oh hell, how shall I put it? You're too holier-than-thou in your attitude, too lacking in tolerance for the weaknesses of other people, too quick to condemn without fair trial.'

'Oh,' she gasped, near to tears. 'I'd no idea you thought of me in that way!'

'Then we're both learning a lot about each other this morning aren't we?' he remarked acidly. 'Is the coffee made?'

'Yes,' she replied vaguely. Never had he criticised her before. And suddenly it came to her why he was doing it this morning. He was trying to divert her from her intention to ask more questions.

Aware that he was pouring coffee and dishing up the scrambled eggs, she sat in a daze, wanting to ask who Carol was but realising that to ask would be to reveal that she had found the letter, and had read it, so giving him the opportunity to accuse her of prying.

'Eunice came back from Paris on the same flight as you did. She saw you at the airport. She says you were with a blonde girl who kissed you goodbye...' In spite of all her efforts to sound unconcerned her voice shook and she had to stop speaking.

'I guessed Eunice was at the bottom of all this,' he growled.

'She's always been a good friend to me. I've known her much longer than I've known you,' she began defensively.

'Granted,' he said drily. 'And so quite naturally you take for gospel truth everything she says and regard everything I say as a lie.' He leaned forward, reached out a hand to touch hers, only she withdrew it quickly before he could. 'Look, honey,' he said gently, persuasively, 'a marriage like ours is based on trust. Without trust it's like a ship without a rudder at the mercy of every buffet of wind or wave. Without trust you might as well pack it in and forget it. Is that what's going to happen to us?'

She didn't know how to answer. For the last few months all that had mattered was his physical presence, his love-making. Suddenly they weren't enough. Loyalty to her old friend was still a strong

flourishing plant. Loyalty to this man, this stranger she had married had not yet had a chance to grow.

He finished eating, drained his coffee cup and stood up. The chair legs grated on the vinyl floor covering and Diana looked up to find him staring down at her with eyes like bits of blue flint set in a hard lined mask.

'So you've no answer,' he rasped through taut lips. 'And it's Eunice's word against mine. Best friend versus -husband—a classic situation, so I've heard. But I'm not staying to get entangled in it and I'm not staying to plead forgiveness, either. You can believe what the hell you like!'

He turned away and strode from the room. Quivering from the tongue-lashing she had just received, Diana sat clenching and unclenching her hands as she realised he had put her in the wrong again, accusing her of lack of trust, making her the scapegoat for the sudden shakiness of their marriage.

Springing to her feet impulsively, she went out into the hall. Jason was there shrugging into his sheepskin jacket. At his feet was the leather valise strapped up. The soiled shirts had gone from the floor and so had the note which had fallen there. Another suitcase, one he rarely used and which was kept stored on top of the wardrobe in the bedroom, was also by the door.

'Where are you going?' she quavered.

His glance was indifferent as if he had forgotten her already.

'To Houston. The company have called me in to discuss my next job,' he replied coldly. 'I might have taken you along for the ride, but as things are right now I guess you'd rather stay here and go to tea with Eunice and that hypocrite, her brother.'

'Paul isn't a hypocrite,' she defended hotly.

'No?' The ironic negative seared her. 'I haven't the time or the inclination to argue the point.'

'Jason, you can't go like this,' she said, suddenly frantic realising that there was no softening in his attitude.

'Can't I? Who's going to stop me?' He opened the door and picked up the two cases. In the doorway he paused to glance-back at her. 'You know, there was some truth in what Aunt Gert said. You don't know what love is ... yet.'

'Jason ... I...' She had been struggling with her pride, had reached the point of saying she was sorry, when the door closed in her face.

She stood as if turned to stone, not believing that it was happening, that Jason was leaving as he had left her so many times, but this time without saying he'd be seeing her as he usually did and without kissing her.

Movement returned sluggishly to her limbs. Her hand went to the door-knob, turned it, pulled back the door. No one was there. The landing was empty and silent. There wasn't even the sound of footsteps going down the stairs.

Panic rising within her made her feel sick. She closed the door and hurried through to the bedroom. The window overlooked the street and lifting the net curtains she saw the taxi which he must have phoned for when she had been preparing breakfast moving away from the curb.

Slowly she let the curtain fall. Slowly she wandered round the room, seeing the wardrobe door hanging open and the drawers pulled out from the chest which he had used. Jason had gone, taking his few

belongings with him which meant he had no intention of coming back.

Her throat aching with the tears needing to be shed, she turned to the dressing table. There stood the package of perfume he had brought her and at the sight of it something seemed to break within her. Sinking down on the stool, she laid her arms on top of the dressing table, put her head down on them and sobbed bitterly. She thought her heart had broken.

CHAPTER THREE

'DIANA.' Jason's voice, slightly slurred with sleep, startled her and brought her back to the present, to the hotel bedroom and the starlit sky beyond the window, to the discomfort of her position and the chill which had invaded the room as the temperature -outside slid down the scale. 'What are you doing?' he queried.

She turned her head. The faint radiance of the starlight saved the room from being completely dark and she could just see the outline of his head and shoulders against the sheen of the white light-reflecting headboard of the bed as he propped himself up to peer in her direction.

'I'm ... I'm counting the stars,' she answered, suddenly nervous. How silly her reason for sitting there sounded!

'That's a never-ending job,' he replied. 'Their number is infinite.'

His answer surprised her. It sounded as if he was really interested and had taken her explanation seriously. The outline of him disappeared as he lay down again.

'Brr, it's chilly in here! You must be cold sitting there,' he murmured. 'Why don't you come to bed?'

'I'm quite all right here, thank you,' she replied stiffly, trying to ignore the shiver which went through her. He was right, it was cold, and in spite of the woollen coat her limbs felt frozen.

'Okay, have it your own way,' he drawled sleepily, then gave a strange muffled laugh. 'You'd be quite safe, you know. I've had a hard day one way and another, and I'm too bushed to indulge in any further activity, even if I wanted to.'

More pain stabbed through her. She knew very well what he meant by activity. He meant making love to her, but what caused the pain was the addition 'even if I wanted to.' It implied that he didn't want to make love to her any more.

But why should she be hurt? She knew he didn't want her and had learned it the hard way. After he had left London that day fifteen months ago and had gone to Houston she had still expected him to come back. It wasn't until a whole month had passed by and she hadn't heard from him or seen him that she had finally admitted to herself that he might not return to her.

She had gone to her father and had asked him if he had any idea where Jason might be, and he had given her a rather cold appraising glance.

'Why do you ask?' he had said.

'I haven't heard from him for over a month and I'm beginning to think that maybe something has gone wrong, that perhaps there's been an accident.' A faintly pitying expression in the brown eyes which were watching her had caused her to drop her pride and burst out, 'Oh, Daddy, last time he came home we had a terrible quarrel and he walked out, and I'm beginning to think he's not coming back ever!'

'I see. Well, there's one way you could find out. You could write to him care of his company. I'll get the address for you, and the letter will be sent on to him. I'm sure there . must be some good reason why you haven't heard from him and that he'll be in touch with you soon,' he had replied coolly, and she had the impression that he was not pleased with her, a new experience which had made her feel somewhat lonely.

She had gone back to the flat and had started the letter straight away, and it had been hard to write. Writing to Jason, she discovered had

been like writing to a stranger, for in many ways, although they had shared such intimacy on the physical level of their marriage, their minds were still strangers. So she used stiff trite phrases which expressed nothing of the turmoil of her feelings concerning him, revealed nothing of the heartbreak she had suffered when he had walked out that day.

Life had gone on, but as the days became weeks and the weeks lengthened into months and she received no answer to her letter, she had frozen up completely as hurt pride took over, making it impossible for her to try again with another letter. And her pride had been supported by the ever- comforting Eunice so that gradually she had come to accept the idea that in marrying Jason it was possible she had made a mistake.

'He took all he wanted from you and when you told him you weren't prepared to put up with his casual attitude towards you, you gave him the chance to Walk out on you; a chance he'd been looking for, once he'd tired of you,' Eunice pointed out. 'If I were you I'd try and get a divorce, because he won't be back.'

But Diana had shied away from divorce until just recently. After an outing in the company of Eunice and Paul, the latter had escorted her back to the flat and had tried to kiss her goodnight. When she had repulsed him, he had said in a tight furious voice,

'I'm tired of hanging around, of being kept waiting!'

'Oh, I'm sorry, Paul,' she had stuttered. 'Please don't think I haven't appreciated your friendship over the past' year, but I'm still married to Jason and ...'

'I know that, only too well, and I think it's time you did something about it.'

'Get a divorce, you mean?' she asked.

'Yes. Then it would be possible for me to be more than a good friend. Then I could ask you to marry me.'

'But I'd have to get in touch with Jason. I couldn't divorce him without telling him, without seeing him, and I don't know where he is,' she had replied gravely.

'I'm sure that wouldn't be necessary. I'm sure a good solicitor could arrange everything for you with the minimum of fuss and trouble.'

'Then perhaps that's what I shall do. I'll get legal advice and let you know.'

But she hadn't gone to a lawyer, she had gone to her father instead and once again had asked him if he had any idea of Jason's whereabouts because she wanted to get in touch with him. He had stared at her narrowly for a few moments, then had got up from his favourite wing chair, in which he had been sitting in the lounge of the tall narrow house in Chelsea where he still lived, and had walked over to the sideboard to pour himself a drink.

'Why do you want to get in touch with him this time? You seemed to have no luck last time,' he replied, and as always when they discussed Jason these days there was that faint coldness in his voice which prevented her from telling him of her true feelings.

'Paul wants to marry me,' she explained.

'Mmm. And do you want to marry Paul?'

'I don't know. I like him. He's always been very kind, but I'd hate to make another mistake.'

'So you think your marriage to Jason was a mistake, do you?' enquired Chris rather drily.

'No.' The denial came out without hesitation, but she followed it with a hesitant, 'Oh, I don't really know. We've been married such a short time. I've seen so little of him, I hardly know him. Daddy, what shall I do?' she pleaded desperately.

He stared at her thoughtfully above the rim of the glass which he had been about to raise to his lips.

'Quite honestly, my love, I think you need a holiday. You should get out of that flat, away from those friends of yours, and go to a place which is completely different, where you don't know anyone. I assume you have some holidays due to you?'

'Yes, I've two weeks to come, but I've half promised to go to Greece with Eunice.'

He frowned and looked down at his glass, swirled the contents slightly and spoke slowly.

'I don't think that's the answer. She's too close to Paul and would make it difficult for you to come to a calm unbiased decision. No, I think it would be much better if you came away with me. I'm flying to South America a week from now. I'm going to Venezuela first and then on to Ecuador, possibly on to Peru, if there's time. It's a business- pleasure combined trip. How about taking your mother's place, as you used to do, and come with me?'

With a sense of relief Diana had agreed to accompany him, and now she was here in Quito and her father was hurt in hospital somewhere on the edge of the jungle and Jason was asleep on her bed.

Her foot had gone to sleep. Pins and needles jabbed all over it. She would have to stand up to ease it. Once she was on her feet she hobbled around trying to get the circulation going again. While she did so her flesh goose-pimpled in reaction to the cool air and immediately she thought how good it would be to lie down on the bed, creep under the blanket which covered Jason and warm herself.

He was asleep again. He need never know she was there because the bed was wide enough to sleep three and he had himself said that she would be safe. Hardly realising what she was doing, intent only on getting warm and being comfortable, Diana went to the bed, lifted the corner of the blanket, lay down and covered herself. At once warmth enveloped her, the warmth created by Jason's warm body, the warmth she had missed for so long. It was luxury. She stretched her numbed legs, then pulled them up again so that she was lying in a curved relaxed position. Almost at once her eyes closed involuntarily as the warmth induced sleep.

Then the blanket moved, was pulled off her shoulders. Her eyes flew open. Her whole body stiffened in reaction to the movements which were taking place on the other side of the bed. Jason was turning over. Suddenly an arm, heavy and inert, fell across her waist, pinning her down against the bed.

Dry-mouthed, her heart fluttering like an imprisoned bird, Diana lay stiff and still. Sleep had fled. She was more wide awake than she had been in the armchair. And she daren't move because he might wake up if she did.

Wide-eyed and tense, she wondered what she should do. Once she would have turned into the curve of that arm to face him, to brush her softness against his hardness, to slide her hands over his shoulders round his neck, to touch his lips with hers and waken him ...

Diana groaned aloud, and at once the heavy arm lying across her became tensile. It moved, sliding back until the hand rested in the hollow of her waist. Fingers tightened, then spread out again in exploration. Holding her breath, she willed herself not to move, not to react to that familiar touch, and eventually the hand moved again away from her. The blanket shifted and heaved again as he turned on to his other side and her breath came out in a gush as he murmured,

'Relax and get some sleep. Tomorrow isn't going to be easy. You're going to need all your strength.'

And strangely comforted by the sleepy murmur of his voice, she did relax and fell asleep at once.

She woke to sunshine and silence, blinked drowsily at the window she was facing and for a moment wondered if she had imagined everything which had happened the previous night. Cautiously she turned her head. The other side of the bed was empty. Jason had gone. Leaning up on her elbows, she peered at the chair where he had thrown his jacket and shirt. They had gone too.

A little concerned because he had gone again without leaving any message, she sprang out of bed, undressed, had a quick shower and dressed in a crisp dress of dark green cotton which had a finely etched pattern of black leaves and flowers on it. She was just applying lipstick when the phone rang. The sound startled her and she picked up the receiver hesitantly, half afraid that a torrent of Spanish might come at her from the other end of the line and she might have difficulty in understanding.

'So you're awake at last, lazybones. How about some breakfast while I tell you what arrangements I've been able to make to get you to

'Puno?' said Jason's familiar voice. 'We didn't get around to discussing it last night.'

'Where are you?' she asked.

'In the lobby. See you in three minutes?'

'Make it five,' she replied, and put down the receiver.

Down in the lobby he was pacing about rather like a caged lion. He had bathed and shaved, but was wearing the same suit and shirt. She could not help but notice how other women passing through the lobby turned to look at him. Tall, tanned and blond, he caught the eye in a place where so many people were dark-haired and olive-skinned, and Diana felt an odd little lift of pleasure because she was the woman who caught his eye and towards whom he strode across the lobby.

'I phoned Gary Fawcett,' he said at once. 'He's the oil company's assistant manager out here. He has some news of Chris—says he passed a comfortable night in the hospital. He also said it's all right for you to go with me to Puno.'

'Why? Did you have to get permission to take me?' she . asked, going with him to the dining room.

'Not really, but oil men like to know who's around when a survey is being done. They're worried about possible espionage from rival firms. Gary said to tell you he's sorry this has happened to Chris and hopes he's all right.'

'Thank you. I didn't think ...' She broke off and sat down in the chair he had pulled out from a table for her.

'You didn't think what?' he asked, taking a chair opposite to her.

'That everyone... that you would be so concerned about my father.'

Jason stared at her, then shook his head slowly from side to side.

'You've got some cock-eyed ideas about people and about me in particular. Why shouldn't I be concerned about him? He's a fellow human being and I happen to like him ...' It was his turn to break off because the waiter had come to take the order for their meal and he had to consult the menu. 'What are you going to eat?' he asked her. 'Have you tried the *naranjilla* juice yet? If you haven't you should. You'll get it only here, in Ecuador.'

He gave the order in fluent Spanish, surprising her again so that when the waiter had gone she exclaimed,

'I didn't know you could speak Spanish.'

His blue glance mocked her.

'I lived in this city for the first eight years of my life, if you care to remember, and then later I lived in Texas where it's often used. When you pick up another language as a child you never forget it. The fact that I can speak it is one of the reasons why I was offered a job on this latest survey which the company is doing to find out if there's an extension of the oil fields already discovered,' he replied quietly, then added quite inconsequently, 'Your hair is different.'

Involuntarily Diana's hands went to her hair. Under his close scrutiny she felt suddenly shy and awkward. She, shy of Jason? Never before in the whole of their brief relationship had she felt shy of him.

'I've had it cut. It's the latest style,' she mumbled.

'I liked it the way it was,' he said, and immediately she felt as if she had committed a crime in having her hair cut.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Conscious that he was staring at her, Diana gazed round the room at the sparkling white walls, the dark beams of the ceiling, the red-tasselled curtains at the long windows, at the heavy Spanish- style furniture, even though she had eaten there on several mornings and knew the decor by heart. The waiter returned with the *naranjilla* and, glad to have something to do, she stirred the thick greenish liquid before taking a sip. Its taste was a mixture of peach and citrus, she decided, smooth yet tangy to the palate.

Plates of succulent pink ham and fluffy scrambled eggs followed the juice with cupfuls of delicious piping hot coffee. Inevitably the meal brought back memories of the last time she had taken breakfast with Jason and all that had happened that morning, making her silent and preoccupied as she ate. She remembered also that only a couple of weeks ago she had asked her father if he knew of Jason's whereabouts and realised that he had never answered the question. Then she remembered why she had wanted to know. Somehow during the next few hours or possibly in the next day she must bring up the subject of divorce.

Suddenly the nerves of her stomach crawled and she could eat no more. If he noticed she had left half the food on her plate and was gulping at the hot coffee, then refilling the cup with more from the coffee pot which the waiter had left, Jason made no comment and ate his own food with his usual silent swift concentration.

When he had finished he helped himself to more coffee, pulled out a packet of cheroots, selected one, placed it in his mouth and lit it.

'You used not to smoke,' she said sharply. Somehow the fact that he had developed a habit and she hadn't known about it irritated her, rousing the old possessiveness within her which she thought she had squashed.

Mockery glinted in his eyes as he looked at her through a haze of grey smoke.

'So we've both changed. You've cut your hair and I've picked up the habit of smoking these cheroots. I have a good reason. The smoke from them keeps the flies off in the jungle,' he replied coolly, then added with a touch of sarcasm, 'Do you think we should have asked each other's permission to change?'

Under the cover of the table her hands curled into fists as she controlled her temper. She must keep cool. She mustn't let his taunts get under her skin.

'If you've finished eating we'd better get going,' he went on more crisply. 'I've managed to get a couple of seats on a missionary plane which is leaving for Puno at noon. Is there anything you want to do in Quito before we go?'

'Oh, I'd forgotten—I'm supposed to have lunch with Maria Suarez at her house today,' she exclaimed. 'Daddy once entertained Senor Suarez when he visited London and we're here really at his invitation.'

'I know,' he replied coolly. 'How is it you were able to come? Aren't you still working at Amy Paget's?'

She was surprised that he remembered the name of the small dress company for which she worked. He had dropped out of her life so completely without apparently making any effort to contact her that she had assumed he had forgotten everything about her.

'Yes, I am ... I've been doing quite well. My designs are popular,' she said in a little rush in an attempt to convince him that she hadn't spent the past year pining for him.

'Good for you,' he drawled. 'But that doesn't answer my question. Why have you come with Chris?'

Now was the chance to bring up the subject of divorce, but her mind shrank from it. Her glance lifted to his intent blue eyes which were still studying her through the smoke and flicked away again. She spoke nervously.

'I was due a holiday ... and he asked me to accompany him. It seemed a good idea to see something of South America. So far it's been quite fascinating.'

'Do you like Quito?' The question was asked casually, but his gaze was still intent.

'Oh, yes,' she answered, smiling for the first time since they had met, not knowing she was. 'Now that I'm used to the altitude, being here is like being in the Never-Never Land.' It occurred to her suddenly that he might not know about the Never-Never Land, so she added quickly, 'That's a place in a children's story where all sorts of strange things happen ...'

'Where Peter Pan took Wendy,' he put in. 'I know.'

And for one wild and beautiful moment it seemed to Diana that the magic of their first meeting was back when their minds had met briefly as they had exchanged backchat about Diana the huntress and Jason the wanderer of Greek mythology.

'When you see the jungle,' he continued, 'your feeling of being in the Never-Never Land will be increased and after you've stayed there for a while you'll never be the same again.'

Diana shivered a little. Was he implying that the work he had been doing in the jungle had changed him? Taking a chance because he

wasn't looking at her any more she studied him noting again the darkness of the lines under his eyes, the hollowness under the cheekbones, the tighter more controlled line of the mouth which once had been so quick to smile, so ready to open in laughter. He looked like a man who at some time had been driven to the limits of endurance.

The idea made her uncomfortable. She looked away, gathered up her handbag in readiness for leaving the table.

'Maria has been very hospitable,' she said. 'I must let her know what's happened to Daddy and tell her I can't come to lunch.'

'That's no problem,' he said, grinding out the remains of the cheroot in an ashtray and rising to his feet. 'We'll call in to see her this morning before we go to the airport. Have you packed your cases yet?'

'No. I haven't even thought about it. I suppose I'll have to take everything and check out of the rooms.' She was suddenly a little panicky as new problems reared their heads, demanding solutions. 'I'm not quite sure what I should do,' she admitted, turning to him.

'Go and pack and I'll clear up the business of checking out of the rooms,' he said tersely.

'But how can you do that? Have you enough money? I know I haven't. Daddy was seeing to all that,' she quavered.

'Stop dithering.' he rapped. 'It's all taken care of by the company. Now go and pack, his things as well. And change into something more serviceable for travelling than that dress.'

How bossy he was, she thought, and always had been, ordering her about as if she were a schoolgirl. But then she supposed she had

asked for it, behaving in that helpless way as if she wasn't capable of looking after herself. And really she was very glad he was here and able to organise everything for her, she thought next, and didn't find it odd that her thoughts were contrary.

She packed quickly and carelessly, jamming clothes into the two cases after changing into a slack suit of fine blue denim which she teamed with a crisp white blouse and a jaunty white linen sunhat with a floppy brim. Going into her father's room, she packed his cases too and then rang for the bellboy.

Jason was waiting in the lobby. He gave the collection of cases a quick assessing glance and said,

'You can't take all those on the plane. You'll have to repack at Maria's place and put what you need for yourself and Chris in one case. You can leave the rest with Maria until you come back to Quito. I expect she'll oblige.'

'You sound as if you know her well,' she remarked as she followed him out into the crisp air and bright sunshine of the morning. Under the striped awning which shaded the front entrance to the hotel a brown and cream American station wagon was parked.

'I know her well enough,' he replied, and went to open the back doors of the vehicle so that the bellboy could place the cases in it.

'Is this your car?' was her next question, and over the top of the vehicle he cast a mocking glance in her direction as he made his way to the door on the driver's side of the car.

'Questions, questions, always questions,' he jibed. 'No, it isn't. It belongs to Gary Fawcett. He lent it to me last night to drive out here. Now get in and we'll go.'

'It's going to be very embarrassing explaining to Maria that you and I are married but we're ..Diana broke off as the car swung out on to the main highway which led to the city. Confusion about how she should describe their present relationship choked her in mid-sentence.

'But we're what?' He prompted, putting his foot down on the accelerator so that the car sped along the bright roadway. Down in the valley towards which they were racing, sunlight glittered on the many windows of modern concrete buildings and flattered the smooth curves and domes of old churches. Red-tiled roofs glowed in contrast to stark white walls. Beyond the buildings the mountains rose in layers of terraced green and above them all soared Cotopaxi, the overlord of Quito, arrogant and supreme, shimmering white against the blue.

'We're ... we're separated,' she said jerkily.

'Are we separated?' he queried coolly.

'Well, we haven't lived together for over a year.'

'Nor much before then,' he commented drily, and silenced by this truth Diana turned to look out of the window and reconsider her position before making another sideways approach to the subject of divorce.

They were passing through the new residential area. On previous outings Diana had come to the conclusion that not one house was the same. There was the Moroccan chateau, a pink and green building which had many curved arches over the windows and doorways. Right beside it, looking very incongruous, was a house designed like a Swiss chalet, neat and brown with a steep sloping roof which needed only snow as -a background to make it look authentic. Beyond that was a house which seemed to be a series of boxes painted pastel blue, all having round windows like the portholes of a

ship. Its doors were oval and it had a flat roof edged with a chromium railing which glinted in the sunlight. To complete the cosmopolitan atmosphere an imitation castle built in solid Scottish baronial style with turrets and battlements stood at the end of the row.

'I shouldn't worry too much about having to explain anything to Maria,' Jason said suddenly, as if he had been pondering the situation and had reached a conclusion about it. 'Sancho knows what's happened to Chris because I phoned him yesterday evening before I came to see you. I told him about us and he'll have told Maria by now. Being great supporters of the institution of marriage they're probably puzzled by our behaviour, but they're both generous enough to accept us as we are without question. That's what I like about them.'

And that was another dig at her, thought Diana ruefully. He was implying that she didn't accept people as they were without question.

They were into the city now, passing down a busy street. Pedestrians thronged the sidewalks. There were well-dressed businessmen with briefcases, soldiers in uniform marching in a group, a crocodile of schoolgirls, neat in navy blue and white, being shepherded by a schoolteacher, possibly on their way to the Cathedral whose white walls and green dome towered over the Plaza Independencia. Housewives carrying baskets and parcels lingered before shop windows and everywhere there were Indians wearing brightly-coloured ponchos and high-crowned Panama hats which, Diana knew now, were woven in Ecuador from the straw of the *toquilla* plant.

Jason turned the car off the main street, drove through a maze of cobblestone streets as if the way were well known to him and swung through an archway, decorated with the carvings of fruits and flowers, into the central courtyard of the old Spanish baroque house where the Suarez family lived.

They stepped out into a sunlit walled-in silence which was broken only by the tinkle of water falling from a fountain and the twitter of birds which hopped about the drooping branches of a tangerine tree. Spiky cacti and stiff-leaved palms cast deep black shadows on the coloured tiles of the floor which years ago had been inlaid with the bones of oxen to create a mosaic effect. Now the pieces of bone had been worn to the smoothness and appearance of old ivory by the passage of many feet over them.

Large Majolica-ware pottery jars were set about the courtyard. The glaze of them was crazed by thousands of small cracks. The wood of the banisters and supports of the old wooden gallery glowed against white walls, smooth and golden, and from it trailed a tangle of many vinelike plants the green leaves of which were starred with purple, yellow and scarlet flowers.

'This is one of my favourite places,' said Diana, looking round with delight as she did every time she came to this courtyard.

'It's one of mine too,' replied Jason to her surprise just as the big door of panelled wood set under a carved archway in one of the walls swung open.

Through the doorway came the flashing-eyed bundle of joyous energy who was Maria Suarez. White teeth glinting in her olive-skinned face, hooped golden ear-rings aswing beside her plump cheeks, she embraced Jason heartily with all the warmth and affection which only a person of latin ancestry would show.

'Jason, *amigo*, *como esta usted?*' she exclaimed, smiling up at him. He answered in Spanish and gestured towards Diana; she was immediately embraced also, enfolded against the plump bosom by gentle arms and kissed on both cheeks.

'Ah, Diana, now sorry I am to hear about Christopher. What are you going to do?'

'I'm taking Diana to Puno to see him today. We're flying on a plane which leaves about noon,' said Jason in his most authoritative fashion, and for a brief moment Diana was reminded of the time when he arrived at the house in Chelsea and dealt with Aunt Gertrude in similar fashion.

'*Bueno*,' said Maria seriously, nodding her head. 'That's how it should be. In times of trouble we all need our loved ones about us. Come now into the house. You shall have coffee before you go?'

'There's one little matter you can help us with, Maria, if you will?' said Jason crisply.

'*Con mucho gusto*,' replied Maria. 'What is it?'

'Diana has too much luggage to take on the plane. Could she repack it here and leave some of her cases with you?'

'But of course. Bring the cases in, to the small bedroom which you used to have when you stayed here, *amigo*, and while I help Diana to repack, Ximena will serve you with coffee in the salon. Ramon is about somewhere. I expect he would like to see you.'

The bedroom was more like a bed-sitting room and looked over the large garden. It was as sumptuously furnished as the whole of the house was with old Spanish- style furniture made from dark wood which gleamed glossily against white walls. Being on the ground floor it had a window which opened on to a stone terrace and beyond the terrace the massed foliage of trees and shrubs gave the impression that the house was built in the country and not in the centre of a busy city.

Maria took over the repacking of the cases in her determined, practical way, taking out clothing, selecting and rejecting, then packing the selections in the largest of the four cases.

'It is hot and humid where you are going. Cotton is the best for you to wear. Ah, I see you have cotton skirts and some blouses, and these pants will be good.' She turned and eyed the denim suit Diana was wearing. 'Yes, that is suitable too. You will need clothes for Christopher, too?'

'Yes, some shirts and trousers,' said Diana. 'Maria, do you think he will be all right where he is?'

'But of course. The hospital at Puno is the latest. It has all the best equipment from the United States and there are many well-qualified doctors and nurses on the staff. Now do not worry, little one. You have Jason. He will look after everything for you and help you' like a good husband should.'

'You must think it very strange that I ... I ... said nothing about him to you,' said Diana diffidently, and received a sharp glance from narrow dark grey eyes.

'I did not think it strange, for I know all about the reserve of the English and how they do not talk all the time about their problems as we do,' replied Maria, folding a shirt with an expertise which Diana envied. 'It wasn't difficult for me to guess you were married to Jason. Your surname is spelt in the same way.'

'You see, I didn't know he was here in Ecuador. My father didn't tell me,' continued Diana, who was still feeling a little conscience-stricken because she had not confided in this good-natured woman who had been so kind to her.

'Ah, he is a deep one, that Christopher,' said Maria, and her eyes twinkled with humour. 'But he cares very much for you, *querida*. He has been worried about you.'

'Oh. Has he?' Diana was surprised. How odd that she should have to come thousands of miles to his enchanted land to find out so much she hadn't known before. 'Did you know Jason was married? Did he tell you?'

'*Si*, I knew, but Jason did not tell me. In all the months I have known him he never mentioned you once, not even when he stayed here after the accident.'

'Accident? What accident?' Diana felt a prick of fear and remembered suddenly the scars she had seen on Jason's body the night before.

'You did not know? He did not tell you?' exclaimed Maria. 'But that is taking reserve too far! Ah, the coldness of you Northerners! Shall we of the South ever understand it? No, not in a million years.'

'Please will you tell me about it?' pleaded Diana in a small miserable voice and the grey eyes softened with compassion.

'Let us sit down for a moment,' said Maria, sinking on to the side of the bed which was covered in a damask-like quilt of red and black silk. 'It happened about two weeks after he arrived. One of the rigs which was being erected for a drill to be sunk collapsed and a man was trapped under the wreckage. Jason crawled under to try and free the man. More steel fell on him and he was trapped too. He was badly crushed. If he was not such a strong man I think he might have died. There was no hospital at Puno then, so he was rushed to Quito. He was very ill, *querida*. Six months it took him to get better. Some of the time he stayed here with us—this was his room. Ah, I should not have told you. You are quite pale. Are you going to faint? Maybe

this is why they do not tell you about it, because you are—how do they say it?—squeamish?"

'No, no, it's not that. I'll be all right,' whispered Diana, pressing her hands to her clammy cheeks. 'Please go on. Why did he come to stay with you?'

'My Sancho, as you know, has interests in the oil company. He knew Jason's father and remembered how he died here in this country. He visited Jason in hospital and one day he came home and I saw that he was very worried. I asked him why and he told me he was worried because although Jason's body had mended satisfactorily he was not making a proper recovery. Sancho felt there was something wrong here.' Maria touched her forehead. 'I do not mean that Jason was strange in the head but that he was deeply depressed about something and the depression was slowing down his recovery. So I offered to have him here. I am a good nurse. My niece, Rosa, was staying with me at the time and she helped too. We talked about many things while Jason was here, but not once did he tell us about you, although I guessed there was someone. When I tried to find out he would close up or change the subject. What happened, Diana, between you and him to make you both so unhappy?'

'We quarrelled,' muttered Diana stonily.

'You quarrelled? Ha! Forgive me if I laugh. What is a quarrel? Sancho and I have many, but they pass. We make up.' Maria's eyes twinkled. 'That is the best part of any quarrel, the making up afterwards.'

'But this was serious. Jason lied to me,' Diana defended herself. 'We'd been married only nine months and he ... there was another woman...' She broke off. Pride stiffened her face. She was telling Maria too much.

'I understand,' said Maria softly. 'You were hurt, and because you were hurt you struck back. Then the ice of pride set in. It spread and now you are almost completely frozen. It is sad for you to be like that when you have Jason for your husband. He needs warmth and softness in a woman, for he is the hard, tough one. I shall pray for you and hope that the warmth of our lovely country will melt the ice round your heart so that you will be free to love again. Now I think that is all you will need for the few days you will be in Puno. Let us go and have some coffee. Ramon will want to see you to tell you how sorry he is about Christopher.'

They went back to the salon, a big gracious room which had dark beams across its ceiling. A crimson carpet glowed on a floor of shining wood and wide windows were set open to the fluttering green of the garden. They sat on an elegant sofa with legs and arms of carved wood and they drank from delicate china cups. There was no sign of Ramon or Jason, but soon there was the click of heels on the stone terrace and Ramon appeared at one of the windows.

He was a slim young man. His hair was thick and black. His face was delicately moulded and he had a mole high on one cheekbone, but there was just enough cruelty in the curve of his mouth and in the flare of the nostrils of his thin pointed nose to save him from being pretty. When he saw Diana he went up to her, sank down on the sofa beside her and to her astonishment grasped both hands in his and kissed them.

'I am desolate,' he murmured, looking at her with dark eyes in which a little flame seemed to leap.

'Why?' she asked, aware that Jason had come in from the garden too and that Maria had gone to speak to him at the open window. 'Whatever are you talking about?'

'I have just learned that you are married to that big bully over there,' said Ramon, leaning back and pushing his hands in the top of his jeans, abandoning his pose of the latin lover for that of the casual student which he was.

'But you knew I was married. You must have noticed this.' Diana held up her hand on which the wedding ring glinted.'

'I noticed it, *si*, but when you did not say anything I thought perhaps you had been widowed. I should warn you that I am not the only one in this family who will be desolated by this news ...'

'Diana? Are you ready? We must go now.' Jason spoke sharply and his eyes were hard as he came over to stand before them, but when he spoke to Ramon his voice was lazy again with good humour. 'You can save all your sweet whispers, *muchacho*, for your girl-friend at the university.'

'*Muchacho?*' Ramon nearly choked on the word as he sprang to his feet. He doubled a fist and made a pretence of hitting Jason on the chin. 'I am no boy. I am as much a man as you are.'

'Think so?' Jason scoffed. 'Don't you believe it. You're still tied to your mama's apron strings.'

Laughing, he dodged back as the young man attacked him again and he was still amused by the stream of Spanish invective which Ramon flung at him when they went outside into the courtyard to the car.

'It was unkind of you to tease Ramon like that,' said Diana as she waved goodbye to Maria, who kissed both her own hands and flung them out in a gesture of farewell as the car left the courtyard. 'He meant no harm.'

'I wasn't thinking of the harm *he* might do to *you*,' Jason said in a cool hard voice as he braked under the archway to make sure no traffic was coming down the narrow street before moving out into it. 'I'm solely concerned about the harm *you* might do to *him*.'

'I don't understand. What harm can I do to him?' she asked, and he slanted her a sardonic blue glance before taking his foot off the brake and swinging the big vehicle between the high walls of the street.

'He's at an impressionable age, when it's easy to fall in love. He's looking for the ideal woman. Could be he thinks he's found her in you. You know, you've always presented something of a challenge to the male ego—or perhaps I should say a temptation—even more so now you've matured a little.'

'Oh, you make me sound like one of those awful women who set out deliberately to lure men on to disaster,' she objected hotly, and searched in her handbag for her sunglasses. With the sun approaching its zenith the glare of light on white walls and glass was eye-stabbing.

'Siren is the word you're looking for,' he drawled. 'And come to think of it, it does describe you pretty well. You tempt a man to pursue you, as I know to my cost. You certainly deceived me into believing you were something special with your fine white skin and gold-flecked hair, in that golden dress which matched your eyes, with the promise of warmth in your mouth and your lovely body. But what did I find behind the show? Nothing.'

His bitter condemnation of her brought their first meeting vividly to mind. Diana's hands curled until the pointed nails of her fingers dug into the soft mound of flesh below the thumbs. She seemed to see everything, the other cars, the walking people, the dazzling buildings, through a thin red mist as she struggled with the pain which his sudden attack on her had inflicted. They had left the city and were

speeding along the broad highway which led to the airport, before the red mist thinned and everything began to look normal again.

Under the brilliant white light of the noonday sun the distant airport buildings quivered in a mirage as if floating on water and, beyond them, the silent green mountains seemed to have been newly painted, their colour was so bright against the molten blue of the sky.

The pain was easing and out of it was growing a desire to hurt him as he had just hurt her. All the pent-up frustration of the past fifteen months rose up, burst out and overflowed as a long dormant volcano erupts fierily and spews out hot lava.

'You were deceived!' She heard her voice break out low and furious. 'You think you were the only one? What about me? Stupid little romantic fool that I was, I fell for the strong he-man image and I believed you married me because you loved me. I believed you'd given up your freedom to marry me. But you did nothing of the sort. You had no intention of giving up anything to be a real husband and you never thought of me as your real wife. I was just one of the women you dropped in to see, the woman in London ...'

'That isn't true.' The denial was fiercely spoken.

'Then why did you walk out that day? Why didn't you write and tell me where you'd gone? It was because you didn't want me any more, wasn't it? Because you were glad of an excuse to get out of your commitment to me.'

Sitting crouched in her seat, staring unseeingly before her, Diana could hear her heart thudding loudly in her ears keeping in time with the throb of the car's engine. Vaguely she was aware that they were approaching the airport buildings, were turning into the car park and that the car was being parked neatly and efficiently between other

cars. Then the engine was switched off and silence lay hot and heavy between them except for that pounding in her ears.

She glanced uneasily at Jason. One arm resting on the steering wheel he had turned to look at her. His face was a bronze-coloured mask on which harsh lines had been carved. His eyes were a bleak wintry blue.

'So that's how it looked to you,' he drawled bitingly. 'And I bet I can guess who helped to make it look that way. Dear little Eunice, your friend who was so jealous of you that she did her damnedest to blacken my character in your eyes ...'

'Oh, she didn't ... I mean, she wasn't ...' she began defensively, then with her eyes widening in puzzlement she asked, 'What do you mean by saying Eunice was jealous of me? Why should she be jealous of me?'

'If you don't know why it's hardly my place to tell you,' he replied obscurely. 'But there are a few things I'd like to put you wise about. When I walked out that day, as you put it, I was going to Houston, as I told you. From Houston I was sent almost at once to Quito to take over the position of assistant survey boss. Now comes the part which I suspect you're not going to believe. I was going to write to you suggesting you came out here to make a home for us in the city, where we could be together when I wasn't working in the jungle. Before I could do that I had to go to the site of the survey to sort out some problem. While I was there something happened which made it impossible for me to write ...'

'The accident. Maria told me,' she said in a small voice, suddenly humble. More pain was crawling over her, not because he was hurting her but because he had been badly hurt and she had not been able to help him.

'By the time I was seeing straight again,' he went on., coolly as if she hadn't interrupted him, 'your letter had arrived. It came about three months after you'd posted it.' He paused, took a breath and added tautly, 'I've told you how I felt about your offer to forgive me. As far as I was concerned that offer meant you still didn't trust me and still believed I was a liar. While you felt like that—you're quite right, I didn't want you in any way whatsoever. So I didn't write to you, thinking that one day maybe, you'd grow up and get the message to either try a different approach or...' he paused again before adding heavily, 'or arrange for a divorce.'

Diana licked her lips. The heat in the car was stifling and she could feel beads of perspiration gathering, on her forehead. The subject of divorce which had been lying like a submerged rock beneath the wayward drift of her thoughts for the last few weeks now emerged dark and ugly and she shrank away from it, instinctively knowing it wasn't what she wanted.

'I'm sorry you were badly hurt in the accident,' she whispered in a desperate attempt to let him know she cared about his well-being even though they had been estranged for so long. 'I wish somebody could have let me know.'

'What good would it have done if you had known?' he countered bitterly.

'I would have flown out to be with you ...'

'To hold my hand and tell me you forgave me?' he jeered harshly. 'Oh, no, I'm glad that didn't happen. That would have, been taking advantage of me while I was laid low. After I'd read that cold little note of yours I was glad I'd forgotten to tell the company that I'd got married while I was in Britain, glad that the only next of kin who knew I was ill was Uncle Bill in Texas and that he didn't know of your existence either.'

Diana turned away sharply so that he could not see the tears which had started in her eyes. She wasn't going to let him see how deeply his bitterness was hurting her.

'I hope the message is getting through to you,' he continued. 'I didn't want your, forgiveness and I don't want it now, because I've never done anything for you to forgive. You see, like some poet said once, I've been faithful to you in my fashion, no matter what ugly tales your friend Eunice told you about me.'

'But you still lied to me about why you went to Paris,' she cried out. 'You wouldn't tell me why you had to go there, and that's the same as lying.'

His breath came out in a hiss of exasperation. There was a hint of suppressed violence in the way he turned away from her and jerked back the lever which opened the door.

'What's the use of trying to explain?' he grated. 'Get out and I'll lock that door from the inside. I'm leaving the car here for Gary to pick up later. If we stop to argue any more we'll miss the plane and I don't know when I'll be able to arrange a lift as good as this one. Now, hurry!'

CHAPTER FOUR

WHEN she saw the plane in which they were going to fly to Puno, Diana understood why Jason had insisted she should take only one suitcase with her, for it was a small craft with two engines. He told her it had room for only six passengers, or seven, if only one pilot was aboard.

It was painted white and blue and, in comparison with the sleek silvery jet-liners in which she was accustomed to flying, it was like a cheeky cocksure sparrow in comparison with a streamlined high-flying seagull. Its engines were idling ready for take-off when Jason urged her up the moveable flight of steps to its door. As soon as the door was closed behind them the noise inside increased as the engines began their work and the plane started to taxi towards the take-off runway.

Dumping her case and his own zipped holdall into a locker at the rear of the plane, Jason pushed her into one of the two empty seats and ordered her to fasten the seat belt. Apparently there was no helpful stewardess on this flight. It was a strictly do-it-yourself procedure.

Within a few minutes they were airborne and the plane was turning close to the side of the green mountain. Through the window Diana had a view of Quito tilting beneath her, looking like a slab of pink and white ice-cream set on a saucer of green. Then it slid away and she was seeing the shadow of the little plane darkening the feathery tops of close-matted trees which covered the slanting side of a deep gorge dividing the mountains. Far, far below at the bottom of the gorge was a river like a fine silver thread winding through thick green tweed.

Sitting back in her seat, she looked round the interior of the plane.

Across tie narrow aisle, sitting in a single seat like her own, was a small dark girl of about ten years of age. She was wearing a bright red dress and a necklace made from multicoloured beads and red feathers. Her straight black hair was neatly combed and held back with a clip. Her golden-brown face shone with cleanliness. The colour of her skin and her slightly flattened nose showed her Indian origin and she seemed as fascinated by Diana as Diana was by her.

On the seat in front of the girl was an Indian woman who was nursing a tiny baby and, across the aisle from her, on the seat in front of Diana was an Indian man who occasionally looked round and back at the girl as if to make sure she was all right. In front of him sat another man in the second pilot's seat, and in front of the woman sat the pilot. Behind Diana was Jason and across from him was another man who, judging from the way in which he was talking to Jason, knew him well.

Looking out of the window once more she saw that as they followed the gorge the river grew wider and they were closer to it as they descended. Now it looked like a silver snake lying on a carpet of green moss.

'What river is it?' she asked, turning to look back at Jason.

'The Rio Napo, a tributary of the Amazon. A little further north of here my father worked with a team which searched for oil several years ago.'

'And found it?' she queried. With an odd jolt of excitement she realised that for the first time she was entering the world in which he worked, a world from which she had always been shut out when she had lived in London.

'That's right,' he said. 'We're going further south to an extension of that particular oil field, or at least to what we hope is going to be an extension of it.'

'Haven't you tapped any oil yet?'

'Oh, sure, we've found some, but not enough to make the project economically viable. There's a lot more exploration and tests to be done, enough to keep me in this country for the next few years.'

There was another message in that for her, she was sure. He was telling her he was going to stay in Ecuador, but before she could ponder what effect that might have on her own future the plane turned south, banking rather sharply and descending a little bumpily.

The baby cried out and the little girl whimpered. The Indian parents jabbered frantically in a strange language, obviously frightened by the sudden lurch. Diana reached across the aisle and took the little girl's hand to comfort her and was rewarded by a shy smile. The pilot of the plane turned in his seat and shouted something to the Indians in their own language. He had a broad sun-tanned good-natured face under rough curly brown hair and his grin was reassuring. The Indians seemed to accept his reassurance and shouted back at him cheerfully.

'The pilot is Ted Turner,' Jason said. 'He's a missionary and also a doctor. He and his pals have done more to help the jungle Indians than anyone. The tribes were being wiped out by diseases brought by the white men, mostly measles. Ted and his friends fly vaccine in to the jungle villages and inoculate the inhabitants. It has a way of convincing them that not all white men are wicked exploiters.'

'From up here the jungle looks impenetrable,' she said, taking another glance at the matted green trees below them.

'But it isn't, and never has been. There used to be large concentrations of people along the river banks before the Spaniards brought disease with them. And the ancestors of your little friend across the way from you have lived in it for hundreds of years, keeping at bay invaders with their puny wooden blowpipes and poisoned darts, right up to the twentieth century. They're Jivaro Indians, famous for their skill in shrinking the heads of human beings to the size of oranges.'

'Oh, no!' gasped Diana, sending an apprehensive glance at the little girl, who smiled at her again.

'Don't worry. Most of them have given up the practice now,' said Jason. 'Their wild ways have been tempered by the likes of Ted. We should be landing in a few minutes. Only you and I and the driller sitting across from me are getting out at Puno. Ted has some medical supplies to deliver there and then he's taking this family to their village. Apparently the baby had some intestinal trouble and Ted flew it and its parents to Quito so it could have an operation. The trip seems to have paid off. The baby looks quite healthy now.'

Keeping to herself her surprise that he showed such interest and concern for the natives of the country, Diana made sure her seat belt was fastened securely. The little plane dropped neatly between the green walls of the forest trees on to a short landing strip. It hit the ground with a grunt and waggled along for a while before coming to a complete stop.

Here there was no convenient flight of steps wheeled in position so that they could leave the plane graciously. They had to jump out into long wet grass. The air was hot and humid and as they walked towards the prefabricated hut which was all Puno had in the way of an airport building Diana felt as if she was walking about in a sauna bath. Her skin was soon covered with drops of perspiration and her clothing became glued to her.

Suddenly out of the cloudy grey sky a helicopter, looking like a huge dragonfly, dropped towards the air-strip. It just cleared the tops of the trees and the draught from its rotor blades made their upper branches sway, disturbing birds which rose up in a flock shrieking in protest. The *whop- whop-whop* sound of the vehicle's engine echoed back from the wall of green forest as it sidled in and landed. Hardly had it touched down than its door opened and several men, all wearing hard hats and stained clothing, jumped out and began to walk towards the hut.

The same name which was painted in yellow and red on the helicopter was also-painted on the door of a chunky estate wagon to which Jason led her, and Diana soon found she wasn't the only passenger. The men who had come from the helicopter all piled in too, greeting Jason noisily. One of them jammed himself into the front seat beside her. A slow grin lit up his dirt-streaked sweaty face and he introduced himself as Tex Gordon. Then he began to talk to Jason, who was driving, and she found that the English as spoken by him, in a slow flat drawl, was almost as unintelligible as the language which the Indians on the plane had spoken.

To her surprise Puno was not a clearing in the jungle with a few wooden huts as she had imagined it would be. It was an established town built on a hillside beside a winding river. Even from a distance she could see the colonial Spanish influence in the twin-towered church dominating a cluster of old whitewashed houses with roof tiles which had become bent with age and green with mould. But there were more modern bungalows strung out beside the road from the airport and several new concrete structures glittering with glass stuck up like sore thumbs from among the older buildings.

In the main street Jason stopped to drop off the men who were members of the survey team and had come into town for a well-earned rest and a night out. Once again Diana was alone with him

and was able to move along the seat, away from close contact with him which, she had to admit, she had found very disturbing.

'Puno is bigger than I expected,' she said, covering sudden nervousness with speech.

'It's booming right now, as you'd expect with the possibility of new oil wells being discovered. But it was prosperous before. Making alcohol from sugar is one of its main industries. Maria's family have owned the operation for years. You'll see the name on the factory on the north side of the town—Guillermo Ltd. Puno also has a tourist attraction. It's considered to be one of the gateways to the jungle. Here we are.'

He had turned into a small square. On one side of it was a simple adobe church with only one tower. Opposite the church was a wooden building with a verandah overhanging its downstairs windows. On the verandah was a sign of neon letters which made up the words Grand Hotel.

Jason stopped the station wagon in front of the hotel, opened his door and stepped out. Feeling as if she was having to unglue herself from the vinyl covering of the seat, Diana also got out of the vehicle and stepped down on to the muddy surface of the road.

In the quietness of the square she could hear the sound of water spilling over stone and looking round saw an immense tree standing in the middle of the square. Its wide outstretched branches were covered with thick green leaves which dropped over a stone fountain. The water from the fountain had collected in a big puddle which reflected the white tower of the church. Beside the pool sat an Indian woman, her face hidden by her Panama hat, her long skirt spread out over her feet. Near her was a basket of oranges and lemons, their clear crisp colours shining in the dullness of the cloudy day.

'I usually stay here,' explained Jason as they went up creaking wooden steps to the verandah of the hotel. Old wicker chairs and loungers were set out on the verandah beside small round tables. 'Are you hungry?' he asked as he pushed open one of the double doors, the glass panels of which were decorated with patterns of stained glass, small oblongs and squares of green and red.

'A little. I'm more thirsty than anything,' she replied.

'We'll leave your case in my room, have a light meal and then I'll take you to the hospital,' he said.

The proprietress was a plump, surprisingly fair woman with a round beaming face. She welcomed Jason with a bright smile and was pleased to meet Diana although sorry to hear the reason for her being there. She spoke English with an accent which Diana decided was German rather than Spanish, and she seemed very businesslike.

Jason's room was furnished with a double bed, a huge chest of drawers and a wardrobe. Its window overlooked the square. The bathroom was next door to it and although as old-fashioned in appearance as the rest of the hotel, was in working order. Diana found the feel of water on her hot sticky skin was refreshing and was glad to run a comb through her hair which was also suffering from the effects of a change in climate and lay in oily snake-like coils against her head. While Jason took his turn in the bathroom she changed quickly out of her limp crumpled slack suit into a loose-fitting cotton dress which she took from her case.

Downstairs in a dim dining room where the predominating colour was brown a fan whirred above their heads while they ate *aji de polio*, a spicy dish of chicken mixed with onions, tomatoes and green peppers and served on mounds of rice. Jason chose beer to drink with his while she had a soft drink rather than the usual bottled water.

After she had eaten Diana felt much better and did not object when Jason suggested that they should walk to the hospital.

'It isn't far from here and you'll be able to find the way back more easily on your own if you've already walked it,' he said as they stepped out into the sultry atmosphere again. 'I can't stay with you. Tex was telling me of a problem which had cropped up at one of the new wells and I'll have to go there this afternoon.'

'Will you be back today?' she asked as coolly as she could, trying not to show her consternation at being left alone in such an alien place.

'I'm not sure. Don't expect me,' he replied, equally cool.

As they walked up the muddy lane which was edged by wooden, bungalows each one having a verandah and a garden of overgrown grasses, palm trees and eucalyptus trees, the clouds which had hovered ever since they had arrived came lower and rain began to fall. Jason put hand under her elbow and urged her onwards to the two-storied prefabricated building which was the hospital. They reached it just as the rain came down, lukewarm and dancing with gnats and mosquitoes.

It was rain such as Diana had never seen before. It was like long grey strings and it changed everything. Buildings seemed to move closer together in the grey haze it created. The lane became a stream of gushing water and the corrugated iron roofs of the houses resounded to the noise of perpetually pinging drops.

Inside the entrance hall of the hospital seemed cool and quiet in contrast to the steam-wet commotion which was happening outside. A smiling dark-eyed young woman answered Jason's questions and then greeted Diana in careful English.

'Senor Farley will be pleased to see you. You will find him still tired and a little forgetful. The bang on the head was not good,' she said.

'Is there any chance of him being well enough to be moved to Quito soon?' asked Diana.

'I am afraid I cannot tell you. You will have to ask Doctor Willis. Perhaps if you come in the morning you could ask him then. Your father is in a room down the passage to the right, third from the end.'

'Thank you.' Diana turned away to go down the passage, but her arm was caught in a well-remembered grasp and Jason led her over to a window out of the hearing of the receptionist.

'I haven't time to come and see him. I have to catch the next chopper flying out,' he murmured.

He hadn't released her arm and she could feel the roughness of his hand against her bare skin as it slipped down slowly, almost caressingly. Her head bent, she stared at the opening of his shirt. It was unbuttoned almost to the waist for coolness and the navy blue colour contrasted sharply with the sun-bronzed, hair-roughened skin of his chest.

It was a moment of parting and it recalled to her mind so many other moments of parting when they had clung together in desperation as if they couldn't have enough of each other. Now all she wanted was to lay her head against him, to rub her cheek against his warm throbbing body as she had done in the past, seeking comfort.

The longing mushroomed within her, shaking her with its violence. Hardly realising what she was doing, she raised her head urgently and her pride came tumbling down, leaving her defenceless and at his mercy.

'Jason, don't go. Please stay with me.'

His fingers tightened briefly on her arm. She saw bone show through the taut skin at his jaw and his eyes go dark and knew a moment of triumph because she could still rouse passion in him. But in the next moment his hand fell away from her arm and he looked through the window at the straight grey equatorial rain.

'I can't,' he replied coolly.

'Then come back tonight, please.'

He gave her a quick surprised glance, then looked at the rain again.

'I'm not making any promises to you,' he said tersely. 'I could be at the site for several days.'

'But supposing I've gone when you come back to Puno? Supposing Daddy is well enough to be moved to Quito and we leave here? What will you do then?' she said desperately, as he turned away from her and walked towards the door. He was going away again, leaving her as he had done so many times, but like the last time he had gone he was making no commitment to her.

He stopped, his hand on the door ready to push it open. His glance drifted over her face, then her body, as if he were trying to memorise everything about her. Encouraged by that glance, Diana leaned forward and put a hand on his arm.

'Please, Jason,' she murmured.

'Please what?' he countered, and the bitterness was back in his voice. 'Please tie myself down to some arrangement which will suit you and then when I can't keep it be accused of deceiving you? Oh, no, not any more. From now on I'm calling the tune and if you don't care to dance to it you know what to do. Let's put it another way. If you're

not here when I return to Puno I'll know that it's all over between us and I shan't bother to follow you. Tell Chris I was asking after him, will you?"

The glass panels of the door flashed as it swung open and closed again. Through them she watched him run through the grey rain down the muddy lane until he had gone. She turned and, aware that the receptionist was watching her curiously, walked down the passage to the right.

The room where she found her father was small but clean. It had pale primrose walls trimmed with green. Like the rest of the hospital it had air-conditioning. A nurse was with her father, taking his temperature and pulse. She looked up as Diana entered and her dark face was split by a wide white smile.

'Here's your daughter, Mr Farley,' she said in a pleasant lazy American drawl. 'He's still a little dopey,' she added in a whisper as she passed Diana on her way out of the room. 'Don't stay too long and don't let him talk too much.'

Chris Farley was lying back against pillows. There was a plaster across his forehead presumably covering some wound and his right arm was in a sling. His eyes looked tired, but he managed a smile and held out his good hand to her. She linked her fingers in his and smiled through the tears which pricked her eyes suddenly.

'You're a fine one!' she teased softly.

'I was lucky. The pilot was killed,' he replied. 'And I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Jason.'

'Oh.' She felt suddenly weak and sat down quickly on the chair which had been placed beside the bed for her. 'What did he do?'

'He was waiting for us to land and ran to the helicopter as soon as it crashed. He pulled me and one of the other men clear before the wreckage caught fire.'

He closed his eyes, but continued to hold her hand. Her tears spilled over the lower lids of her eyes and she bit hard on her trembling mouth. Now she knew why Jason had been so tired the night before and once again she had learned, second hand, of his bravery, of his concern for other people.

'I expect you were surprised to see him,' said her father. He had opened his eyes and was watching her. There was nothing sleepy about him now. He looked as shrewd as ever.

'Yes, I was. What a trick to play on me!' she rebuked him gently.
'You knew he was here, didn't you?'

'Yes. When you didn't get an answer to your letter I made it my business to find out where he'd gone.'

'Why didn't you tell me?' she demanded.

'For several reasons, the chief one being a certain dislike of interfering in other people's affairs. You see, I knew all about that quarrel you and he had.'

'You knew! How? Who told you?'

'He did. He called to see me on his way to the airport that day. I could see he was upset. He told me why and I was inclined to take his side in the whole business. That's why I didn't tell you where he was. I thought it would do no harm for you to suffer a little for your lack of trust in him. You know, my dear, you behaved rather badly, taking Eunice's word instead of his.'

To be chided, even as gently as this, by the one person who had always been on her side was almost too much for her to bear, but she gulped back her tears and made an effort to defend herself.

'There was more to it than that,' she muttered. 'It wasn't just Eunice's word against his. Daddy, did you write and tell Jason you were bringing me to Ecuador?'

'No. I thought a surprise wouldn't do him any harm. But I didn't expect him to be so prickly with pride where you're concerned. I had the devil of a job persuading him to go to Quito to tell you about the crash and my injuries. I thought it would be a good way for you to meet again so that you could talk things over.' He gave her an enquiring glance. 'Have you?' he asked.

'I suppose we have,' she mumbled. 'At least I've found out why he didn't write to me after he came here. Oh, but he hasn't been very nice and now he's gone away again. Nothing has changed. The search for oil is still more important to him than I am.'

'Is he coming back?'

'Yes, but he wouldn't say when.'

'And where are you staying?'

'At the Grand Hotel in the square.'

'Mm. Not the best place for a woman to be alone at this time in this town. You'll have to take care. Men who come in from the jungle after working there for a couple of weeks drilling aren't always particular about the way they behave.'

'Don't worry, I'll be careful.' She could see he was tiring, so she rose from the chair. 'I'll come again tomorrow, in the morning when the doctor is here. Maybe he'll let you be moved to Quito.'

'I doubt it,' he sighed. 'My head still whirls and my ribs are very sore. Another thing, Diana, try not to overdo it in this climate. It's very enervating and I wouldn't like you to be ill.'

Fortunately the rain had stopped outside, but the atmosphere was steamy and a cloud of mosquitoes seemed to follow her down the muddy lane so that by the time she reached the hotel she was glad to step into its dimness.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' The plump proprietress stepped out of the shadows.

'Tea? Really?' queried Diana, already feeling less limp at the thought of taking great gulps of the liquid. 'Oh, yes, please!'

'Good. Then I shall make it myself. Go and sit down in the lounge, and I shall bring it there.'

The lounge was another dim room on the other side of the hall from the dining room. It was furnished with a rather dreary green carpet and several basket-weave chairs with cushioned seats and some small occasional tables. The wooden walls were decorated with old brown and white photographs of people in Edwardian dress. Some were standing in groups in front of the hotel, others were with laden donkeys obviously about to set out on some expedition through the jungle.

Diana was staring at one of them when the proprietress came into the room with a tray on which there was a teapot and two tea-cups and saucers,

'Come and sit down, over here,' she said as she set the tray down on one of the tables. 'I shall have a cup with you.'

'You don't speak English with a Spanish accent,' said Diana after she had taken her first sip of the tea.

'No. I came here from Germany many years ago, with my husband. You'll find many Germans here, mostly in the hotel and pension business. My husband took this hotel in a small town because he knew that one day oil might be found and then *boom!*' She laughed, a jolly warm chuckle. 'And that is what happened. While the oil gush we boom. But the country is expanding and the tourist industry is growing. More and more people want to take trips down the river to see the jungle and the strange Jivaros.' She took a sip of her tea, flashed Diana an appraising glance and said, 'Your husband, Senor Clarke, he will be coming back soon?'

'In a few days, he said.'

'He is a good man. You miss him when he is not at home with you?'

'Er ... yes ... I do.'

'Most men who work for the oil company here, they are not married, although there are some who have been married but are no longer. I didn't know Senor Clarke was married, but I should have guessed he was, for once he told me he was thinking of buying a house in Quito, of making a home there, and to have a home a man must have a wife.' She smiled complacently at Diana as if she had just stated a great truth. 'You will agree that is so, Senora Clarke?'

Again Diana agreed automatically with the woman because it was easier to do so, but the suggestion that Jason had been considering buying a house and might have already bought it nagged at her all evening.

Night came quickly, falling like a black velvet curtain and blotting everything from sight. There were only a few people staying at the

hotel and all of them appeared to be Spanish-speaking, so she found little in the way of entertainment there. The bookcase in the lounge yielded a few books in English, most of them American paperbacks. She did, however, find an old mildewed copy of Thornton Wilder's story about Peru called *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, but it did not hold her attention for long. Her mind was too full of problems, turning all the time like a wheel of which the hub was Jason.

Upstairs in his room she lay on the bed, too lethargic to undress, listening to the noises of the night which came through the window which had a wire mesh screen across it to prevent flying insects from entering the room. There was a faint sad strumming of a guitar, trilling laughter from a girl, the tinkle of the fountain in the square. Above her a fan whirred incessantly, stirring the warm air to give the impression of coolness. But the draught it created wasn't really any cooler and she lay soaked in sweat, longing for Jason with an intensity which she had never known before and which alarmed her.

If only he had not felt obliged to go to the site of the oil wells this afternoon. If only he could have stayed in this room, lain on this bed with her in the dark, they could have talked, asked questions and given answers, moved closer to understanding each other and to loving each other.

Talk things over. Her father's suggestion and the reason why he had invited her to come to Ecuador and meet Jason. What would he think of their attempts to talk so far? Slanging matches he would call them, she thought with a grin, as she recalled the way she and Jason had flung words at each other in the bar at the hotel in Quito and then during the drive to the airport this morning. No, her quiet-mannered, elegant father would never consider such uninhibited expressions of feeling as talking things over.

But at least she and Jason had communicated. Honesty had flared between them and she had learned at last why he hadn't written to her.

Why, oh, why had she written that stiff silly letter to him? Why hadn't she waited for him to write to her as he had intended to write before the accident? He probably would have written when he had recovered and he would have told her how ill he had been, and she would have understood and have flown out to look after him.

Instead he had received her letter and it had hurt his pride so that he had rejected her and Maria Suarez and her niece Rosa had done the job which should have been hers.

Diana writhed on the bed as regret made her ache because she had not been on hand to help Jason through the difficult period of his illness, and beneath the ache was a deeper stabbing pain as she remembered his savage rejection of her attempt to show she cared about what happened to him and of her offer to forgive him.

I've been faithful to you in my fashion, he had said, and she believed him now. Perhaps if he had said that fifteen months ago everything would have turned out differently. But would she have believed him then? Wouldn't she have still believed Eunice?

She groaned again, twisting her head on the hot pillow. She wished she hadn't listened to Eunice, but it had never occurred to her that her friend could be jealous of her and had been acting out of spite. Why had Eunice been jealous of her? Had it been on behalf of Paul? Jason had said he knew why but that it was hardly his place to tell her. And what had he meant by that?

If he had been there, lying beside her in the sweltering heat, she would have asked him. She would have asked him about that other letter too, the one from a woman called Carol. She would have found

the courage to confess she had read it. And he would have explained who Carol was and why he had gone to Paris to see her. And no matter how much his answer hurt her she would have accepted it without question so that they could start afresh and be together again.

But he wasn't there. He had gone away again, and if she didn't stay in Puno until he returned she might never see him again, because he had made it clear that he wasn't going to come after her if she had left by the time he came back.

He didn't want her any more. He had learned to manage without her. Or maybe he had met someone else? Yes, that was it, someone for whom he was thinking of buying a house in Quito; someone whom he would marry once he was divorced from herself. What was it he had said? *Try a different approach or arrange a divorce.*

Her random thoughts pricked like thorns and made sleep impossible in that small hot room, but they brought her face to face with herself and made her realise that now she had seen Jason again, had been with him for a few hours, she loved him with all her heart and soul and that if she couldn't live as his wife she didn't want to live at all.

In the morning she had a dry mouth, a splitting headache, but a strange calmness of mind as if at last she had come to terms with herself and in so doing had grown up. A bath, a clean cotton dress, a breakfast of fresh orange juice, bread, butter and jam and hot delicious coffee did wonders for the dry mouth and the headache. Then she was ready to set off for the hospital.

The air was still muggy, but the sun was shining, bringing a sparkle to everything which had not been there the previous day. The little church gleamed invitingly from the other side of the square and Diana promised herself a visit to it later. The puddles in the lane glinted blue and green as they reflected sky and trees and, on the telephone wires, pretty green parrots swung and chattered gaily.

At the hospital she met the doctor in charge of her father's case. He was a young American whose crisp and cheerful manner reassured her. He told her that he was not in favour of having her father moved to Quito.

'Rest and quiet are all that are needed to help him recover and he can get that just as well here as he can in Quito. To send him there by plane and by road right now would do more harm than good.' He gave her an assessing glance. 'Is there any difficulty about you staying in Puno to be near him? I reckon he could be moving about and well enough to fly back to England in about a week.'

'No, there's no difficulty,' she said.

'Then let him be and we'll reassess the situation at the end of the week. Okay?'

'Okay,' she agreed, thinking that by then Jason might be back and she would have one more chance to come to some arrangement with him.

'I take it you've had all the necessary vaccination shots for this part of the world and aren't likely to go down with smallpox, yellow fever, cholera, or develop typhoid or tetanus?' he said more seriously. 'If not you'd better let me inoculate you now.'

She told him which inoculations she had had, he seemed satisfied, gave her some pills to take in case she felt feverish, warned her not to drink the water but to always buy the bottled sort or drink soft drinks, and to avoid any heat rashes by keeping her body clean and dry.

She went off to see her father to tell him that he would be staying at least until the end of the week. He nodded and said,

'I told you that would be the case. I'm quite happy here. I'm well looked after. I'm just a little worried about you, though. Are you sure you're comfortable in that hotel?'

'Yes, I'll be fine. The proprietress is very nice and she knows Jason.'

'And that's a help?' he queried.

'It seems to be,' she agreed.

'How are you feeling about him now? Still thinking that a divorce might be a good idea?'

'No. I've decided I love him and want to stay married to him. I don't want to marry Paul and never did. But I'm not so sure about Jason. Daddy, he seems awfully bitter about what happened.'

'Well, frankly, my love, I'm not surprised. I warned you he'd be hard to handle and you seem to have touched him on the raw by not trusting him. Even so I think if you'd dropped everything and run after him that day he left for Houston he'd have taken you with him. But he's a tougher proposition now. It must be something to do with that letter you sent to him. What did you say?'

'I... I said I'd forgiven him,' she mumbled.

'Oh, my dear, that was foolish of you.'

'Well, I didn't know what to write. It was so hard,' she burst out. 'If I'd only known where he was I'd have flown out to be with him. I wouldn't have had to write that beastly letter. Anyway, it was your idea that I should write.'

'So it was,' he agreed with a sigh. 'But I didn't realise how lacking in understanding you were. Perhaps if your mother had been alive she could have guided you better...'

'Please, Daddy, you've not to blame yourself. You're quite right—I didn't understand about love. I mean the sort of love which goes with marriage. I thought it was enough that we wanted one another. I'm learning, or I hope I've learnt, that there's more to it than that. The only thing is ...' Her voice wobbled slightly and she bit hard on her lower lip to stop it from trembling. 'I think I may have learned too late,' she went on. 'I have this awful feeling that Jason has found someone else and that he doesn't want me any more.'

'There's one sure way you could find out,' commented Chris Farley, lying back on his pillows.

'Oh. How?' Diana exclaimed.

'Ask him, next time you see him,' he said, and she thought that there was just the beginning of a twinkle in his eyes before he closed them as if he wanted to rest.

During the next two days, in spite of the steam bath atmosphere in which she was living, Diana enjoyed her visits to the hospital because they brought her not only in touch with her father but also with the doctors and nurses at the hospital, all of whom were young and enthusiastic about their work. As well as serving the needs of the men who were working for the oil company it also served the local community, and clinics were held there every day to teach good health standards to the Indian families which attended them.

At the hotel Diana was on very good terms with Gerda Schwartz, the proprietress, who was always ready to make tea and drink it with her and who went out of her way to make her stay in the place as comfortable as possible.

The biggest problem was filling in time during the long dark evenings. There was so little to do at the hotel, and Gerda had advised her not to go into the town at night alone because women were not expected to go about unescorted by a man after dark.

'And on no account must you enter the bar, here in the hotel or any other hotel in Puno, by yourself,' added Gerda, looking very severe, rather like the matron of a strict girls' school.

'Why not?' asked Diana, who was often amused when Gerda adopted the role of protector of the innocent.

'Because nice, pretty young women like you do not have the same freedom to come and go here as they do in England. If you go into a bar here by yourself the men there will think you are in search of male companionship and some of them will be only too glad to force themselves on you. And I do not think Senor Clarke would be too happy about that, do you?'

'Perhaps not,' sighed Diana, agreeing as always with Gerda when she made a comment about Jason and realising that he had probably known what he was doing when he had brought her to this small old-fashioned hotel. He had known that Gerda would keep an eye on her. The thought cheered her a little. Perhaps Jason did care about what happened to her still and perhaps that small ember could be fanned into a blaze and he would love her again.

One afternoon, just as she was leaving for the hospital, a big black Cadillac swept into the little square and stopped outside the hotel.

'Gott in Himmel!' exclaimed Gerda, reverting to German as she often did in moments of excitement. 'It is Luis Guillermo!'

'Is he important?' asked Diana.

'He is one of the country's most wealthy men, Senor Sugar himself. I wonder what he wants here?'

'I'll leave you to find out,' replied Diana, and went down the steps just as the chauffeur of the car opened the back door and a man with sleek black hair who was wearing a smart light grey suit got out and stepped towards the hotel.

Diana dawdled all the way to the corner of the square, turning back every so often, just as curious, she thought, as the local brown-skinned children who had appeared to stand near the car and stare at it with solemn round eyes from under the brims of old Panama hats.

Suddenly Gerda appeared and waved a fat pink arm to her. Diana waved back and then realised that the woman wasn't waving goodbye, but was beckoning to her, so she walked back the way she had come. By the time she had reached the hotel the black-haired man was poised on the bottom step.

'Senora Clarke, I am Luis Guillermo, brother of Maria Suarez,' he announced abruptly, stretching out his right hand. 'My sister asked me to call on you and here I am at last.'

His smile had the same brilliant quality as Maria's, but lacked the warmth of hers, and under his straight dark eyebrows his dark grey eyes were narrow and appraising, their glance sweeping over Diana from the floppy-brimmed white linen hat over the casual cotton dress down to her white sandals. He was about forty-five years of age, was very handsome in a lean dark way and was extremely self-assured.

'I am pleased to meet you, *señor*,' she replied rather reservedly.

'Your father, he is well?' he enquired urgently.

'He improves every day.'

'Ah, that is good. I would like very much to visit him if that is at all possible.'

'Yes, I'm sure he would like to meet you. I'm just going to the hospital now.'

'Then please permit me to drive you there.' He gestured briefly yet imperiously to the waiting chauffeur. The door of the car was whisked open and after a brief hesitation Diana stepped into its air-conditioned coolness and sat down in the far corner of the deep leather-covered seat. Luis Guillermo followed her and sat in the other corner, hitching up his impeccable light grey trousers to preserve the knife-edge of their creases.

'And where is the indomitable and enigmatical Jason?' he asked, speaking with a touch of mockery as if Jason caused him some amusement.

'I didn't realise you had met him,' she replied.

'But of course I have, several times. In Quito at the Suarez house and he came to stay at my *hacienda* for a few days.' He turned his head to look at her in that appraising way which made her feel uneasy. 'But I did not know that he had such a very pretty wife. I wonder why he kept us all in the dark about you?'

Diana couldn't provide an answer to that question which would not involve her in a long explanation about Jason's normal behaviour; about how he loathed small talk and loathed even more talking about himself. So she kept quiet and gazed out of the window, thinking that it was Jason's refusal to talk about himself and what he did or had done which had caused their brief marriage to founder.

At the hospital the small monkey-faced chauffeur opened the car door, Luis stepped out and turned to help her out keeping his hand on

her bare arm as he walked with her up the steps. As she had expected her father was pleased to have another visitor and Luis treated him with that mixture of warmth and courtesy which Diana had learned was characteristic of Ecuadorians.

'And now I have a suggestion to make to you,' Luis said after they had talked generally about the helicopter crash and the state of Chris Farley's health. 'I would like very much, *señor*, to take your daughter up to my *hacienda* to stay for a day or two. Do you permit it? It would be better for her than staying alone at that hotel. I am like you, *señor*, a widower, and my daughter Rosa lives with me. She is a few years younger than Diana, but I think she would be interested in meeting her and in having her company for a while.'

'Well, first of all, let's get one thing straight,' said Chris Farley with a smile. 'Diana doesn't need my permission to go anywhere. She is a free woman.'

'Ah, yes, I understand,' said Luis Guillermo. 'So? What do you say, *señora*? Will you come with me this afternoon to stay the night with us and possibly the next night too? The house is built at a slightly higher altitude than the hotel where you are staying, so the nights are a little cooler. We have every modern convenience and you would be very welcome.'

'It is kind of you to ask me, *señor*, but I came here to stay near my father and visit him every day. Couldn't I come with you, stay for a few hours and return later tonight?'

Luis's long thin-lipped mouth made a semi-circle as it turned down at the corners and he shrugged his shoulders.

'You could, but it is a good twenty-five miles from here and it would-be more convenient if you could stay a night or two.'

Diana hesitated. She wanted to visit the *hacienda* very much and also to meet Rosa, of whom Maria had spoken so highly, but she was afraid that if she stayed two nights away she might miss Jason when he returned to the hotel.

'There is no need for you to stay here all the time on my account, my dear,' said her father accommodatingly. 'I'm feeling much better and I don't think I'm likely to have a relapse if you go away for a day or two.'

'But supposing Jason comes back and I'm not here?' she protested.

'You leave a note telling him where you have gone,' suggested Luis practically. 'You can even tell him that Rosa and I would be delighted to see him again if he should care to come to the *hacienda* to collect you. Now, what do you say, *senora*? As they put it in your country, you have no leg left to stand on. I have cut them both from beneath you.'

Diana could not help laughing. It was true he had demolished her final objection to his plan. He laughed with her, showing for a moment a brief resemblance to Maria, but when his laughter had stopped she thought she saw the cold glint of challenge in his eyes as they met hers and a strange little tingle of warning went through her.

'So it is settled? You will come with me this evening?'

'You're sure you'll be all right, Daddy?' she asked, turning to her father.

'Quite sure. Go and enjoy yourself. It will make a change for you. After all, it isn't every day in your life you're invited to stay at a real *hacienda*,' he replied, smiling.

'Then I'd like to go with you, *señor*,' she said to Luis. 'But I'll have to go back to the hotel to collect some clothing and to leave the note for Jason.'

'Of course. There is no hurry, although I would like to leave before darkness comes so that you can see something of the scenery on the way there.' He turned to Chris and added, 'We shall take care of her, so do not worry, *señor*. I would like very much for you to come and stay for a while also, when the doctor says you can leave hospital.'

'That is very kind of you, *señor*,' replied Chris Farley, 'but I'm afraid I'll have to forgo the pleasure of visiting your estate. As soon as the doctor gives me the go-ahead I'll have to be on my way back to England. This accident has already delayed our return and we're several days behind schedule. Unfortunately I have to be back in England by the beginning of next week to attend a business conference.'

'That is a pity,' replied Luis politely, 'but I understand. Shall we go now, *señora*?' he asked, turning to Diana with a smile. 'And may I call you Diana?'

CHAPTER FIVE

THE road to the Hacienda Guillermo followed the river upstream from Puno. It was wide and well built. The telephone wire was strung beside it and at times was so hidden by greenery that Diana had the impression it was strung from tree to tree rather than supported by poles. The way sloped upwards gradually and the river lay below it to the right, a light shade of green turning to white foam wherever the water fell over rocks.

After several kilometres the road swung right and crossed a new steel bridge which spanned some rapids. Spray seemed to fill the valley beneath the bridge and everything was moist as if from rain which was floating upwards rather than falling downwards. Rocks and leaves shimmered with colours, blue, red and violet as the sun's light glistened on globules of water.

Everywhere was the green of the forest, tree embracing tree closely, entwined with the coils of creepers. Pale greens, dark greens, brilliant emerald and mysterious bottle greens and among them, here and there, the small red fires of orchids glowed.

'When I was a boy this road was only a path for horses and mules,' said Luis. 'Often the bridges were made of two tree-trunks with earth stuffed between them so that when you crossed a ravine you had to hope your, horse was surefooted and knew the bridge well.'

As he finished speaking the road swung left to cross the river and Diana had a glimpse of a deep gorge full of tangled green vegetation, falling away steeply to the river, which was now so far below that its water looked black with occasionally the white frothing lace of foam.

Up and down went the road. Sometimes it thrust inland away from the river edge and into the forest, but always returned to the river. Suddenly it seemed as if the trees were without shadows. The glisten

left their leaves and they changed shape, growing softer in outline. All colour seeped away from them as if a lamp had been turned down. Night came in one quick stride so that except for the two beams of the powerful headlights everywhere was dark.

'Even in the dark I can feel that the green is still there,' said Diana.

'Si. As I had guessed, you are sensitive to your surroundings,' observed Luis. 'The jungle is making a big impression on you. Always you will remember your visit to the edge of it.'

Jason had said something similar, she remembered, as the car nosed through a small village where a few lights shone from the church and few houses crouching round the square.

'Tomorrow when you wake up you will see the mountains again, far away against the sky,' continued Luis. 'The *hacienda* is big—it reaches over several hills and is bordered by two rivers. I live near this one. My younger brother Antonio has his house near the other. We grow sugar, some cacao and some coffee. We also have a banana forest and I have a private hobby, the growing of citrus fruits and peaches. It makes for variety in the colour of the fields, you understand.'

He moved in the darkness. There was the quick flare of a lighter and the flame illuminated his high cheekbones, his thin-lipped mouth and finely arched nose, then darkness again and the rich smell of cigar smoke.

'Have you been married to Jason long?' he asked, surprising her with the sudden change from the general to the personal.

'A little more than two years,' she replied, hoping she betrayed nothing of the insecurity she felt concerning her marriage to Jason.

'Yet he has been here more than a year,' he remarked. 'I find it strange that you have been apart for so long when you have been married for such a short time. In the early years of the relationship it is usual for a couple to wish to stay close together. Was it not possible for you to accompany him to Ecuador?'

He was probing delicately, it was true, but she did not know how to answer without lying, so she sat mute in the darkness, thinking that this man who sat beside her was only a few years younger than her father, had a daughter of similar age to herself, and she must not let his undoubtedly powerful physical attraction disturb her. She looked out of the window, noticing that they had turned off the road and were going up a wide driveway at the end of which she could see a glimmer of light inside the outline of the building.

'You do not answer,' he murmured. 'And I think I can guess why.' She felt him move, felt revulsion quiver through her as his hand, slim and long-fingered, touched hers. 'You are cold, *chiquita*,' he said softly, and his tobacco-warm breath fanned her cheek. 'Is it because you have been starved of love for a year? It is a shame that one so pretty should have been neglected for so long, and it makes me wonder about Jason. Is it possible that the strong, silent tough guy has only water in his veins after all instead of blood?'

Diana shrank against the side of the car, wishing suddenly that she had not agreed to come to the *hacienda*. There was no doubt in her mind that Luis Guillermo, although old enough to be her father, was making a pass at her.

Out of the mixture of sheer distaste and panic which swept over her in reaction to his touch was born a determination to keep aloof from him without showing she was afraid of him.

'My hand is cool, *senor*, because of the excellent air-conditioning of your car. It works so well that I wish I'd worn a cardigan,' she replied

with a little laugh as she withdrew her hand from beneath his. 'As for the reason why Jason and I haven't been together for a year—that is entirely our business. But I shall tell you why so that you don't make any wrong guesses about us. Ours is a modern marriage. I'm a working woman, I have a career. When Jason came out to Ecuador it wasn't possible for me to leave my job. He understood that and accepted it, just as I accept the fact that many times he has to work in places where I can't go. We are equal partners in our relationship, you see.'

The explanation forced out of her by the necessity to protect herself from this predatory man made her feel better because in part it was true. She and Jason were equal partners, even if at the moment their relationship was a little shaky.

There was silence for a few seconds during which time the car slid quietly to a stop in the courtyard of a house. By the mellow golden light cast by elegant pear-shaped glass lanterns, which were encased in delicately twisted wrought- iron holders hung from brackets jutting out from the walls of the house, Diana could see the saw-toothed shadows of palm trees and the long mottled leaves of the plant known as Mother-in-Law's Tongue which grew in clumps beside the walls.

'Bravo!' murmured Luis admiringly, removing his hand from her knee where it had rested ever since she had slid her hand from beneath it. 'You have the makings of a good fencer, little one, and I am looking forward to crossing swords with you again. But perhaps I should warn you that fencing is a sport at which I have excelled for many years. Now I must welcome you to this house which was once the home of Maria who likes you so much, and was built long ago by an ancestor of ours who came from Spain to settle here and grow sugar cane. It is old, made of wood, but has a quaint charm which I think you will enjoy.'

They were met in the entrance hall of the house by a woman whom Luis introduced as Senora Matrillo, the housekeeper. She greeted Diana politely and answered some questions put to her in Spanish by Luis.

'Senora Matrillo will show you to your room. Perhaps you would like to wash and change your clothing, then come down to the salon where we shall drink an aperitif before dinner and you shall meet Rosa,' said Luis to Diana, smiling down at her in his suave way. 'You will find, I think, that we are quite civilised in what our American friends call this neck of the woods.'

The room to which the housekeeper showed her had walls of split bamboo which were painted white. Its window gave on to a wide verandah and was fitted with a fine mesh screen to keep out insects. The furnishings were simple but in excellent taste: a double bed with wooden ends which was covered with woven blanket in bright colours; a wooden' wardrobe and a chest of drawers on which there was wood carving of the Madonna and Child. Some small original paintings decorated the walls. Diana peered at them closely in the light from the bedside lamp. Some of them were abstract in style and looked as if the painter had been in a violent mood, had taken up several tubes of paint at once and had squeezed them haphazardly on to the canvases. Others showed more discipline and were obviously of local scenes, including one of the small square in Puno with the little adobe church regarding its reflection in the pool.

The bathroom was small but adequate and smelt strongly of chlorine. Diana washed and returned to the bedroom to change her clothes. She chose a long skirt of dark brown cotton which had a pattern of English wild flowers printed on it. With it she wore a yellow cotton figure-hugging sweater with a scooped-out neckline and long sleeves. The colour set off the golden tan she had acquired during her stay in the country.

Feeling a little apprehensive about meeting Luis Guillermo again, she went down the stairs and found the salon. It was a long wide room. Its bamboo walls were painted pale green and it was furnished with simple furniture made from a golden-coloured wood. Luis was there and when she entered he rose politely to his feet.

'What would you like to drink?' he asked, going over to a cocktail bar which slanted across one corner of the room. Diana chose a fruit drink, having decided that she was going to need her wits about her that evening, and he brought it to her, in a long glass which clinked with ice.

'You are interested in art?' he queried as she took the glass from him. She had been studying a painting which covered most of one wall while he had been mixing the drinks.

'Yes, I am. For a while I was at a college of art in London. I studied dress design there. This painting is amazing. Who did it?'

'I did.'

Her glance must have shown her surprised scepticism, for he laughed and added,

'It is true, I did. It may surprise you to learn that you and I have something in common. I have also attended colleges of art in my youth, here, in the United States and in Spain. I am an artist first and a plantation owner second, although I have to admit that the profit acquired from turning sugar cane into alcohol is very important to me. It has enabled me to travel the world and to paint as I wish. But it is as an artist, above all an Ecuadorian artist, that I wish to be remembered when I am dead. That painting which has attracted you is one of many which I have painted of Quito, our capital city.'

She turned to look at the black and red painting. Now that she knew what it represented she could see that the red streaks were the streets and the black angular shapes against a pale lurid background were mountains.

'It's very violent,' she remarked.

'Of course. The history of our city, of our whole country, is one of violence. It has suffered for centuries and is still suffering. It has suffered the violence of volcanic eruption, of earthquakes, of war and revolution. Never forget it was conquered twice, once by the Incas and once by the Spaniards.'

'The Incas? But I thought they were only in Peru.'

'They were there, with a capital at Cuzco, But they moved north and conquered the Quito, a quiet agricultural people who had lived in the area for about a thousand years. You know, it has often occurred to me that the Incas were to our country what the Romans were to yours. They conquered and subjugated the people and then behaved in an enlightened way, showing their talent for government and lifting the standards of life for the ordinary people they had conquered.'

A movement near the archway which was the entrance to the room drew the attention of both of them. A young woman hovered there diffidently. Luis spoke in Spanish curtly and imperiously and the girl moved forward into the lamplight.

She had a mass of shining black hair which was brushed straight back from her high broad forehead. Her level eyebrows over narrow dark eyes, her finely moulded arched nose and her full passionate mouth showed her Spanish ancestry as well as her relationship to Luis. She was wearing a full ankle-length skirt, made from some dark blue material, over a red petticoat the edge of which was decorated with

fancy embroidery in yellow and blue and peeped below the hem of the skirt. Her white blouse had a low gathered neckline and long wide sleeves which were decorated with bands of embroidery similar to that on the petticoat.

'Rosa, I would like you to meet Diana,' said Luis in English. 'She does not speak Spanish, so you will have to practise your English.'

A faint smile lit the narrow dark eyes and curved the full red lips and then was gone, leaving the lovely pale face as sad as a saint's.

'*Buenas noches*, Diana,' Rosa said. 'I am pleased to meet you.' Her English was stilted and heavily accented, lacking the admirable flow and style of Luis's.

'And I am pleased to meet you, Rosa,' said Diana, shaking hands with her.

They ate by candlelight in a small dining room where the table was laid with a white cloth, shining silver and glass. A small boy wearing a white jacket waited on them and the food was very good. There was an appetiser called *ceviche*, which consisted of shrimps marinated in lemon juice. The main course was a delicious stew of potatoes and cheese called *hero* and the dessert was *cherimoya*, a fruit of the jungle with a green skin and white flesh which seemed to have a combination of several flavours—strawberry, pineapple, peach and citrus.

A light French wine was served with the meal and all the time Luis talked mostly about art. His daughter took little part in the conversation and several times Diana glanced across the table at her, only to find herself being surveyed by narrow dark eyes.

There was something about the young woman's submissive silence which worried Diana. It seemed unnatural, and yet it might only be

because she could not speak English very well. Diana also noticed how Luis made no effort to include his daughter in the conversation and compared his altitude to Rosa with that of her own father to herself. At least Chris treated her as a person in her own right, she thought, and did not ignore her. Rosa, she decided, was a victim of Luis's egocentric attitude to life, and as he talked on her dislike of him grew steadily. He might be the brother of the warmhearted Maria, but he was not like her, and his sharp white teeth and long bony hands increased her perception of him as a predator, causing her to shudder inwardly and resolve once again to keep aloof from him.

At last, after searching in her mind for a subject in common through which she might approach the silent, subdued Rosa, she leaned forward and said with a smile,

'I had the pleasure in Quito of going about with your aunt Maria and your cousin Ramon. Maria told me you were staying with her when my husband was convalescing at her home.'

'*Como?*' The dark eyes went wide with shock. Rosa glanced at her father as if seeking help in understanding, but he was leaning back in his chair his face in the shadow and made no attempt to help her. Rosa's mouth compressed. Her dark eyes were covered by her long lashes as she looked down at her nervously twining fingers and she made an obvious effort. 'I do not understand,' she said slowly, as if translating her thoughts from Spanish into English. 'Who is your husband?'

It was Diana's turn to be bewildered. She glanced also at Luis, saw the glint of mockery in his eyes and the saturnine curve to his mouth as he leaned forward again.

'It seems,' he said, 'that I forgot to mention your last name when I introduced you to Rosa,' He turned to his daughter and spoke a few

sentences in rapid Spanish. The only words Diana understood were the two names—Diana and Jason.

Hardly had he finished speaking than Rosa went deathly white and swayed in her chair. Alarmed, Diana was half out of her chair when Luis spoke again, sharply, with a cruel inflection, to his daughter. Rosa's dark eyes flew open. They were glittering strangely. She glared at her father and then to Diana's astonishment she picked up her wine-glass, which still contained a few drops of ruby-red liquid, and threw it at her father. He ducked sideways and the glass flew past him to fall harmlessly on the carpeted floor behind him and only a little of the liquid it had contained splashed Luis's face. Without a change of expression he took a white handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the drops away rather ostentatiously and at the same time issued another sharp order to Rosa, who, bursting suddenly into noisy tears, sprang from her chair and rushed from the room.

'You must excuse Rosa, she is a little excitable,' apologised Luis. 'If you have finished eating may I suggest we go into the salon again. We shall have coffee there and perhaps some liqueur while I show you the paintings I was telling you about and which show, I hope, my intention to reveal the savagery and violence which underly always the apparent tranquillity of life in Ecuador.'

His smooth manner, after the violence of the scene which had just taken place, plus the knowledge that she would have to put in the rest of the evening with him without the presence of his daughter, disturbed Diana, but she showed nothing of the disturbance as she walked with him from the dining room.

In the entrance hall they were met by Senora Matrillo, who seemed to descend on them from the stairway. In a spate of Spanish and with many gestures she seemed to be berating Luis, who listened to her for only brief moment before speaking to her with a sharp nastiness which made Diana flinch on behalf of the woman. But in the next

moment she was taking back all her sympathy for the housekeeper, because the woman gave her an unpleasant raking glance and after almost spitting an unpleasant word at her, turned and flounced off down the passageway to some other part of the house.

'Again I must ask you to excuse the behaviour of one of my household. Senora Matrillo has cared for Rosa ever since my wife died from a fever not long after Rosa was born,' said Luis calmly, leading, the way into the salon. 'Whenever the child is upset by anything Senora Matrillo is inclined to attack whoever she considers to be responsible for upsetting her pet lamb.'

'And Rosa was very upset, but I can't understand why she should be upset because I mentioned Jason,' said Diana.

He turned to smile at her and gestured to the tray which was on a low table before the sofa.

'You will be kind enough to pour the coffee?' he asked. 'I shall pour the liqueurs. And then I shall tell you why I think the mention of your husband upset my daughter.'

She poured the coffee from a beautiful silver coffee pot into tiny delicate cups while he brought two small-stemmed cut glasses filled with tawny liquid and set them down on the table. Then he sat on the sofa close beside her, and she wished she had had the sense to sit in a single chair.

'You will not object if I smoke a cigar?' he queried, taking one from a carved wooden box which was on the table. 'I enjoy most this time in the evening. Good coffee, an excellent liqueur, a fragrant cigar and of course, if it is at all possible, a lovely woman for company. Has anyone told you before that you are beautiful, Diana, in the cool aloof way that some English women have?'

'You were going to tell me why Rosa is upset,' she said coolly, reaching forward to pick up her coffee cup and at the same time shifting away from him along the seat.

'Ah, yes. She was very shocked, wasn't she?' he drawled. 'Her reaction told me much that I have been wanting to know. She is very much in love with Jason, but until just now she did not know he had a wife. The situation is amusing, is it not?'

Rosa in love with Jason! The implications of the suggestion shook Diana to the core. Had her random thought that maybe Jason had found someone else been right, then? Was he in love with Rosa? The coffee cup rattled in the saucer because her hand shook when she set them down on the table, but she managed to keep her voice steady and just a little derisive as she leaned back against the back of the sofa and said,

'You must be joking!'

'Not at all. But let me explain. It has been assumed for the past two years that Rosa would marry her childhood friend Arturo Gomez, a marriage which, I might say, would please his parents and myself very much. It would be a union between two wealthy families which could be beneficial to both. Arturo has been studying in the United States, but he will be back soon. We would like the wedding to take place in a month. I tried to discuss the date with Rosa, but she told me that she would not marry Arturo because she loved another.' He swirled the contents of his glass, a rather grim smile curving his lips. 'Several times I questioned her about the identity of the person she said she loved, without success. I had my suspicions, of course, but no way of proving them until I met you this afternoon.'

'You brought me here deliberately ...' Diana choked a little, unable to put his cruel intention into words.

'To confront Rosa with you?' he finished for her, giving her a sardonic glance. 'But of course I did. And it worked. Now I know definitely that she is infatuated with him. Am I to assume that you knew nothing of this? Jason has said nothing?'

'No. I know only that Rosa was staying with your sister when Jason stayed at the Suarez house after he had been ill,' Diana replied dully.

'Si. That is when it started. I was away travelling at the time.' His mouth took a downward cynical turn. 'It is easy to guess what happened. In Rosa's eyes he was the big brave hero who risked his life to save that of another man and was injured in his efforts, and she was on hand to help him recuperate. What more romantic situation could there be? Added to all that, he is different from any other man she had ever known—strong, silent, aloof, a blond giant with certain god-like qualities, or so she thinks. Rosa is just nineteen. You are not far away from that age yourself, so perhaps you can understand what has happened. Perhaps you yourself once felt like that about him.'

And still do, a small voice said inside her, a voice only she could hear.

'I have to admit I was a little distressed when Maria informed me that Jason was married,' continued Luis coldly. 'I cannot understand why he did not tell us or Rosa. On meeting him in Quito I invited him to come here to the *hacienda* for a while. He accepted my invitation, but did not stay long as he was eager to go back to his work. It was after he had gone that I noticed a certain languor in Rosa and my first suspicions were aroused.' He put down his empty glass, turned so that he faced her and rested his arm along the back of the seat behind her. He had only to flex his fingers, she thought, and he would touch her shoulder.

Immediately she sat up straight.

'And now that I have told you why Rosa was upset at dinner, what are you going to do?' he asked softly, leaning towards her.

'Do?' She turned a startled fawn-like glance on him. 'What do you mean? What can I do?'

'You might want to divorce him and then he would be free to marry again, a circumstance which would please Rosa.'

'But I don't want to divorce Jason,' she replied. 'Why should I?'

'I have been told by my sister Maria that you and Jason have been estranged for over a year,' he said. 'Now, in spite of your gallant effort in the car on the way here to put me off with all that talk about yours being a modern marriage and all that nonsense about equal partnership, I sense that there has been no reconciliation between you and him since your arrival in Ecuador. If there had been he would not have left you alone in Puno so soon after seeing you again. Nor would you seem so starved of love.'

He had leaned even closer to her and she felt his hand caress her shoulder. With a great effort she controlled the shudder which went through her in reaction to his touch and, picking up her handbag, she rose to her feet, thinking it was time she made her escape. Pretending to stifle a yawn, she said sweetly,

'That is merely your opinion, *señor*. Being of the older generation you can scarcely be expected to understand a marriage, such as Jason's and mine. And now if you'll excuse me I'd like to go to bed. I'm really quite tired. It must be the change of altitude. I hope Rosa will feel better in the morning. *Buenas noches.*'

She walked from the room quickly before he had time to rise to his feet. She knew he had it in him to detain her by force. Up the stairs she ran quickly and quietly. Once in her room she closed the door

and leaned against it, listening to her heart thudding. Automatically her hand went to the place where a lock should have been beside the doorknob. But there was none. Frantically she glanced round the room, searching for something suitable to move across the door, for there was no doubt in her mind that Luis Guillermo was the kind of man who would not hesitate to follow her to her room if he wished to.

There was a small carved chest which looked as if it had been designed to store blankets. Taking hold of one of the handles which hung at each side of it, she pulled it across the doorway. It wasn't very heavy, but it was better than nothing and it would stop any invader from making an entrance quietly.

When that was done she sat on the side of the bed and tried to calm herself. It would be some time before she would be able to relax and go to sleep, so there wasn't much point in undressing and getting into bed. She sat listening for the sound of an approaching footstep, waiting for the doorknob to turn, her mind busy with all that had happened during the past few hours and wondering how she could leave the next day and return to Puno.

It was almost midnight when, worn out with thinking and tension, she decided that it was safe to go to bed. She slipped out of her clothing, put on her nightdress and her dressing gown. Plucking up courage, she slid the chest back from the doorway, opened the door, stepped out into the passage and went to the bathroom. The house was quiet, but through the silence came the unmistakable sound of a woman sobbing. Diana paused, her heart contracting with pity. That would be Rosa, still suffering from the shock inflicted upon her by Luis's cruelty.

But there was nothing she could do to help Rosa, she thought as she washed her face and hands, and it was very arrogant of Luis to expect her to divorce Jason so that his daughter could have what she wanted.

She wouldn't be at all surprised if the lovely Rosa had often thrown temper tantrums and created scenes to put pressure on her father in order to get what she wanted.

But what of Jason? How did he feel about Rosa? A chill came over her as she padded back along the passage to the bedroom, for it was possible he had fallen in love with the young woman who had helped speed his recovery after the accident. There was a certain similarity between herself and Rosa. Both of them were only daughters of widowers and she had read somewhere that a man always fell in love with the same kind of woman, over and over again.

She must go back to Puno as soon as she could. She must be there when Jason returned from the oil wells. Then she could ask him who it was he wanted, herself or Rosa. It was the only way of clarifying a very confused situation.

In the bedroom she pulled the chest across the door again, and suddenly her sense of humour got the better of her. This crazy country! she thought with a chuckle. Only here would she be barring her door because she feared that the middle-aged Don Juan who was her host might force his unwelcome attentions on her.

Once in bed she fell asleep with surprising swiftness and did not waken until the sound of imperious knocking on the door and a voice calling her name disturbed her. Sitting up suddenly, she stared at the door. Someone was trying to push it open and couldn't because of the chest.

'Senora, senora, what is wrong? The door will not open!'

Recognising the stilted English of Rosa, Diana bounded out of bed, pulled back the chest and flung open the door. Rosa, who was wearing blue jeans and a white cotton blouse, which did much to emphasise the luscious curves of her body and the olive tint of her

skin, was standing there looking very worried. She was holding a tray on which there was a steaming cup of coffee, a glass of orange juice and some fresh bread and butter.

'Buenas dias, senora, I have brought your breakfast,' she said, smiling. Her smile was brilliant and warm yet didn't touch her dark eyes, which surveyed Diana critically from the tangle of gold-flecked chestnut hair, over the slim white-skinned shoulders and breast, revealed by the low-cut nightgown, right down to the bare toes peeping below the frill of the nightgown. 'I am sorry I was rude last night. Do you forgive me?'

She spoke her apology stiffly as if she had been instructed in what she should say, and Diana could not help but think how insincere she sounded.

'Of course I forgive you,' Diana replied. 'It's kind of you to bring my breakfast. I slept heavily. It must be late. What time is it?'

Rosa set the tray down on the bedside table and glanced at the small gold watch on her wrist.

'It is half after ten. How do you say it?'

'Ten-thirty.'

'*Si.*' The dark glance roved round the room. There was a touch of wistfulness in the oval face. 'Jason slept in here also, when he stayed here,' she said with a sigh.

Diana sank down on the side of the bed and picked-up the glass of orange juice. She seemed fated, she thought, to sleep in beds where Jason had slept.

'Sometimes I used to bring his breakfast to him,' said Rosa, whose English seemed to be improving by the second.

Diana tried to ignore the jab of jealousy which stabbed through her at the thought of this girl seeing Jason in bed in the morning, tousle-haired and sleepy-eyed, the skin of his bare shoulders tautening over thick muscles as he sat up.

'I take his breakfast to him too, sometimes,' she retorted smoothly, and then was shaken by memories of crazy, hilarious breakfasts in bed which she had shared with Jason. If only he were there now, she thought, lying behind her on the bed, Rosa would not be quite so arrogant.

'When my father introduced you to me last night I thought you must be his new mistress,' continued Rosa. 'Are you?'

'Oh!' Diana was shocked by the suggestion. 'No, I'm not. Does he often bring his mistresses home?' she added with an effort to be as blasé about the situation as Rosa seemed to be.

'Si, always. Ever since my mother died when I was a little child, and before that too, I believe. He is like that.' Rosa paused, seemed to search in her mind for more English words, then said slowly, 'He asked me to bring his apologies to you. He is sorry he cannot stay with you today. He has to attend to some business in Puno, but he will return later this afternoon. He has asked me to entertain you. Would you like to see round the estate? We can ride on donkeys.'

'Yes, I would like that.'

'Bueno. I shall go and arrange it. We must go before noon. It will be too hot afterwards.' Rosa paused in the doorway. 'You think my English is good, right now?' she asked hopefully.

'Yes, quite good.'

'I am glad. I learn much from Jason. See you later.'

She smiled and went from the room, closing the door behind her. Diana sat for a moment staring at the closed door, clenching her hands to control a sudden urge to pick up something and hurl it. Jealousy roused by Rosa's remarks about Jason had her in its grip so that for a few moments she felt quite sick. She gulped some of the hot coffee. It scalded her mouth, which had the effect of bringing her to her senses. Rosa was much more like her father than she had at first realised. She had inherited his ability to be cruel in a subtle way. By a few apparently harmless statements about Jason the girl had managed to create a picture of her own relationship with him which would rouse anyone's suspicions.

And her envy and suspicions concerning him could be so easily aroused, Diana thought with a little twinge of pain; by a few words from a so-called friend called Eunice; by a letter from an unknown woman called Carol; and now by a few odd remarks by Rosa. It was the penalty she would always pay, she , realised, for being married to a man as attractive as Jason, but if she was to stay married to him, if she wanted him to love her always, she must learn to control it.

When she had finished her breakfast she washed and dressed in jeans and shirt and for a moment went on to the gallery beyond the long window to look at the view. It was like standing on the bridge of a ship at sea, she decided as she looked down over a broad valley planted with sugar-cane, the green of which glistened in the sunshine like water. It stretched away to the dark rim of the jungle which, close- matted, looked like a line of distant land.

Down in the centre courtyard she found Rosa waiting with two young donkeys. They were a pretty golden-brown in colour and above their ebony-black hoofs their legs were fluffy and white. Their ears were very long and they stood quietly when, with the help of the boy who had waited on the dinner table, Diana and Rosa mounted them to sit on the smooth leather saddles which had been placed on their backs.

The rays of the sun were hot, seeming to burn through the thin stuff of her blouse, and Diana was glad she had chosen one with long sleeves and was wearing her white linen sun-hat. Rosa, she noticed, looked very attractive in a high-crowned Panama hat with a wide brim from beneath which her long black hair, tied at the nape with a ribbon, hung down her back to her waist.

Although the altitude was slightly higher than at Puno there was still the same steaminess in the atmosphere, a suggestion that if the heat increased clouds would form and the tension created would only be released by a violent downpour of rain.

But it was pleasant riding on the donkey, like being rocked in a cradle, and the beast knew its way so well that there was no worry about controlling it. Round the edge of the sugarcane field they rode along a narrow path and from there they visited the orchard of orange and lemon trees where the fruit hung, globes of colour among the leaves.

Into the jungle they went, passing a bank of leaves among which shone the bright faces of gentians. Beyond the bank were crowded shrubs glowing with reddish blossoms. They skirted a small stagnant pool jammed full of a plant which looked to Diana like watercress. Rows of giant green ferns grew thickly, their fronds making a fence and, behind them, the trunks of the trees soared upwards festooned with parasitic plants and creepers some of them with leaves six feet long.

'I hope we won't get lost,' murmured Diana, who was a little frightened by the sameness of it all and by the greenness of everything. Surely that was the same parrot she had seen sitting on a tree a few yards back! And weren't those monkeys which were swinging along through the foliage beside them the same group she had seen on entering the forest?

'If we do, I have this with me,' said Rosa, showing her a small silver bugle which she had slung by a cord over her shoulder. 'And I also carry a compass. It would be foolish to go far without both. Even the native Indians can get lost. We shall go to the edge of this, to the next river. You are okay?'

Diana nodded. Not for anything would she admit to Rosa that she was beginning to feel hot and sweaty, was longing for a cool drink; that she was beginning to be tired of seeing huge orchids hanging in the impenetrable green foliage; that the clouds of white butterflies which rose up from under the donkey's feet no longer seemed pretty; that she was fed up with this monotonous steam bath and yearned for the crispness of the snow on the slopes of Cotopaxi.

However did the men searching for oil stand working under such conditions? she wondered. How did Jason stand it? No wonder they needed to escape to Quito every so often.

At last they came to a clearing where there were some elliptical-shaped houses made of wood and thatched with leaves. Around them were neatly-tilled fields in which there were some men working. At one of the houses Rosa dismounted from her donkey and suggested Diana do the same.

'Would you like to see the house of a Jivaro Indian?' she asked. 'You could tell your friends about it when you go back to England.'

Diana agreed, glad of a change. Her back was beginning to ache from the riding.

Inside the house was very clean. They sat cross-legged on the floor and Rosa spoke to the people who owned it in their own language. The woman of the house was beautiful, having delicately-chiselled aristocratic features. She smiled when she showed off her new baby as it slept in a surprisingly modern cot. There were many modern

touches in the house, Diana noticed, including a set of new shining aluminium cooking pans. A small boy showed her his blow-gun and Rosa explained to her how the weapon worked.

'The dart is dipped into a poison called *curare* which the Indians used to brew themselves. Now it is made by chemists in factories and the Indians buy it from traders. They notch the end of the dart so that it is almost cut off. When it hits a monkey he tries to pull it out. The point breaks off, still in the monkey, and the animal drops down dead. It is clever, is it not?'

Diana could not help but shudder and Rosa's smile widened as if she knew that her own remarks about Jason were designed in the same way. They were darts tipped with poison and were proving difficult to pull out.

Rosa fired another of her stinging little innuendoes quite casually as they rode back through the dim green shadows of the jungle.

'Jason and I rode often, on donkeys like this. How we laughed because his legs were so long they touched the ground on either side of the beast he rode.'

Diana gritted her teeth, determined not to answer, refusing to let her imagination be lured into picturing Jason with Rosa. As they rode on she was aware that Rosa was studying her with sidelong glances from beneath the shadow of the Panama hat, possibly piqued in her turn because her guest was refusing to react to her needling.

'He did not tell me he was married,' she said suddenly. 'Aunt Maria said he was unhappy because someone had hurt him. I guess you are the one who did. I play the guitar well. I used to play to him. He likes music, knows much about it, which is surprising in one who is so tough and strong. He taught me more English. When my father came back he invited Jason here for a few days, and we rode about. We

laughed a lot. He was happy at last, I think. I told him I loved him and would like him to be my husband.'

'And what did he say?' Diana's hands were tight on the rope bridle. She forced the words out. She had to know the answer.

'Nothing, but he went away. Now that I have met you I know why. He could not marry me while he is married to you. Have you come to Ecuador to arrange a divorce?'

'No.'

'Then why?'

'To ... to see him, to be with him.' Diana tried to speak firmly. She wasn't going to admit to this girl that she had had no idea Jason was in Ecuador.

'I do not understand. If you want to be with Jason why have you come here with my father?'

'Because he invited me to come and see his estate and to meet you.'

They had almost reached the edge of the forest. Through the festooned trunks of the trees light filtered yellow, shimmering on thick green leaves, causing deep black shadow§. Diana's glance was caught by a coil of shiny green among the other deceiving greens and even as she watched it moved, became a snake, a slithering, dangerous mass. The leaves about it trembled; some parrots flew past squawking, monkeys swinging in a tree chattered, then all was still again and the huge snake had gone.

A primitive loathing for the creature which she had just seen shook Diana and she was glad to emerge from the claustrophobic gloom of the jungle into the bright hot light of the sun. Ahead the swathe of

sugar-cane glinted bright green and at the top of its slope the house shimmered white as if in a mirage.

'Did you believe my father?' asked Rosa.

'Yes, of course I did. He invited me in front of my own father, who thought it would be a good idea for me to visit a *hacienda* and to meet an Ecuadorian girl of similar age,' replied Diana smoothly.

Rosa laughed, a little trill of mockery which showed her pretty sharp white teeth.

'That is like my father. He is very clever, very subtle. But if you believe that was his only reason for bringing you here, you are sillier than I had thought. He would like you to be his new mistress. I could see it in the way he looked at you last night, hear it in the way he talk to you about his paintings ...'

'Well, I've no wish to be his mistress,' retorted Diana, ducking under a low branch as they left the jungle for good. 'He is old enough to be my father.'

'That would make no difference to him.'

'But it does to me. Whew! I'm glad to be out of there. It was like a steam bath.'

'Si, it is hot today. Later I think we shall have a storm. But you try to change the subject, and I still do not understand how it is you come here when you want to be with Jason.'

'Jason is working just now, at the site of the new oil wells. I can't go there with him,' explained Diana with a sigh of exasperation. The heat was making her cross and she was wishing they were back at the house so that she could lie down in the comparative coolness of her room and rest. 'Just because we are married it doesn't mean we have

to be together all the time. On the other hand, that doesn't mean we don't want to be together.'

'I do not understand,' repeated Rosa, shrugging her shoulders. 'If he and I were married I would fix it so he would never leave my side ..

'Then you don't know Jason,' retorted Diana sharply. 'No matter how you try to "fix" it, as you say, he will never stay in a place if he does not wish to be there.'

Rosa flashed her a bright angry glance and turning her donkey skilfully barred the way. Sitting straight in her saddle, she was able to look down at Diana because she was slightly higher up the slope.

'You say I don't know him,' she retaliated. 'I know this much. I know he will not want you after you have stayed here. He knows my father's reputation and he will think you have become the mistress of Luis Guillermo. He will want to divorce you.'

'Oh, really, now it's you who's being silly,' replied Diana with a touch of weariness, and wiped the sweat which was trickling down her cheek with her forearm. 'I've only just met your father and I've stayed here only one night..."

'And will stay more. Tonight, Papa said, and possibly tomorrow night.'

'No. I'm going back to Puno as soon as I can.'

'How will you do that?' inquired Rosa, raising her eyebrows mockingly.

'I shall go in your father's car, the way I came,' answered Diana. The skin round her waist was beginning to prickle and she had a longing to scratch at it. The doctor's warning about prickly heat rash flashed

into her mind. She must get in, bath and apply talcum powder. On no account must she let herself become ill while staying at the *hacienda*.

'You cannot leave unless my father chooses to let you go,' said Rosa rather viciously.

'What do you mean?' How faint her voice sounded, almost as if she was defeated already.

'You, cannot return to Puno unless my father gives instructions to Jose to take you there, and I know that he has not done that because he told me this morning before he left that you would be staying here all day. He has told Jose not to take you into Puno. And somehow, *senora*, I cannot imagine you riding there on a donkey.'

'Again Rosa' gave that little trill of mockery and turning her donkey she urged it up the slope towards the house, leaving Diana to come more slowly behind.

By the time Diana reached the central courtyard she was limp and wet. The boy came forward to help her dismount and as she began to walk stiffly towards the house the big black car swung into the yard and purred to a stop. She half expected Luis to be in it, but instead of him Senora Matrillo got out of the seat next to the driver, her arms full of parcels. Apparently she had been shopping in Puno and Jose had brought her back.

Upstairs in her room Diana drank some of the bottled water provided, thought longingly of ice cubes and lime water, peeled her clothing from her clammy skin and slipped into her shift-like cotton dressing gown. Then she went along to the bathroom and immersed herself in tepid water, patted herself dry and sprinkled talcum powder all over her body. Putting on her gown again, she returned to her room and closed the door.

She supposed she should go downstairs again for lunch, but somehow the thought of food and more of Rosa's company on this storm-heavy day nauseated her. If Rosa or Senora Matrillo wanted to feed her they could bring the food to her room in the same way as her breakfast had been brought.

Almost as if she were a prisoner. The thought flashed through her mind as she lay down on the bed to rest. Someone had been in the room while she had been out, had made the bed and had closed the shutters against the bright sunshine so that it was dim except for stripes of yellow light where the sun's rays had managed to filter through the slats of wood.

If Rosa was correct, if Luis Guillermo had indeed given orders to Jose not to take her back to Puno, then she was a prisoner, she thought drowsily, because she didn't know enough Spanish to ask Jose to drive her to the hospital to see her father, which was the excuse she had thought of using to leave the *hacienda*. To communicate with the chauffeur she would have to ask Rosa to speak to him, and she was quite sure Rosa would never agree to do that. Nor would Senora Matrillo agree, even if she understood English, which Diana doubted. Neither of them would want to go against the orders issued by the lord and master of this house because they would know he would have some diabolical way of punishing them if they did.

But she had to return to Puno today somehow because, if Jason came back and found she had gone with Luis Guillermo, he might believe the worst of her, as Rosa had suggested, and file a suit of divorce against her on the grounds that she had been unfaithful to him.

Tormented by such thoughts, wishing she had never allowed herself to be persuaded to leave Puno, she lay staring wide-eyed at the ceiling, trying to devise a way of returning to Puno without having to ride a donkey.

CHAPTER SIX

THE idea came to her suddenly. One minute she was lying in a lethargic heat-induced stupor, the next she was sitting up straight her arms hugging her hunched up knees, her mind dancing and her heart jumping in excitement. Was it possible? Did she have enough nerve to do it?

Of course she had. And it was the only way she could get round the language difficulty that she could think of. Anyway, even if her plan failed nothing would be lost. In fact she might be able to make everyone concerned realise that she was determined to leave the *hacienda* this afternoon and be in Puno this evening.

It was the inherent dislike of being detained against her will which had given birth to the idea, she thought, as she scrambled off the bed, took off her dressing gown and began to dress in bra and briefs. Luis Guillermo might be able to lord it over the women of his own country, but he had no rights where she was concerned. She was a free woman accustomed to coming and going as she pleased.

She put on one of her cotton dresses and fastened the buttons of the bodice. She brushed her hair and made up her face as if she were going out in the normal way. She packed her discarded clothing as neatly as she could in the suitcase, snapped the locks shut and placed it in the closet. It was possible she would not see the case again and she knew a moment of regret at parting with some of the clothes it contained. Then common sense quickly asserted itself. Of course she would see it again. This was reality and just because she was making a bid to leave his house it did not mean that Luis Guillermo would never return her belongings to her.

Slinging her handbag over her shoulder, she opened the door of the room and stepped out into the cool passageway. On her way to the stairs she met no one.

At the head of the stairs she paused, looking down into the entrance hall. It was empty. The house was as silent as it had been during the night and she wondered whether everyone was having an extra long *siesta*. Quickly and quietly she went down the stairs and into the salon. If anyone came in she could always tell them she was admiring Senor Guillermo's paintings or looking through some of his books. As she had hoped, the long wide window opened into the central courtyard and there was the big black car gleaming opulently in the sunshine.

She sat down on a chair near the window and glanced at her watch. Soon Jose would appear, get into the car and drive it down to Puno to pick up Luis and bring him back. Using the time when Luis had arrived at the hotel yesterday afternoon as a point from which to calculate, she reckoned Jose would have to leave in about ten minutes, which was long enough for her to go out into the courtyard, open the back door of the car and hide in the space between the back seat and the front seat.

Wiping her clammy palms on the skirt of her dress, Diana stood up slowly, went to the window, opened it carefully and stepped out into the courtyard. She had to take a chance on being seen from a window either by Rosa or Senora Matrillo, but she didn't care if they did see her. Nothing was going to stop her from making her bid for freedom.

She tiptoed across the courtyard. The air was heavy and still, the calm before the storm. The metal doorhandle was hot to the touch. Diana pushed it down, the door came open quietly and she ducked into the back seat. The door closed with a quiet expensive click and, taking a deep breath in an effort to calm her thumping heart, Diana crouched down in the space in front of the seat, glad that the car was big and wide.

Tensely she waited, her eyes on her watch. Three times the second hand went round before she heard footsteps in the courtyard and male

voices speaking Spanish, Jose and the boy-of-all-work. Then the door on the driver's side opened. The seat in front creaked a little as Jose sat on it. The door clicked shut. There was the jangling sound of keys banging against each other as he pushed the ignition key into its slot, followed by the gruff purr of the big engine starting up. More clicking sounds as he moved the lever on the steering wheel and the automatically-controlled car moved gently forward, turned and passed under the archway.

Diana let out her breath slowly. She was on her way to Puno. Cautiously she moved, trying to find a more comfortable position, feeling a vibration through the floorboards of the car as it rolled over the rough surface of the narrow road leading away from the house to the main road. Once it rode over a pothole so that she was jolted upwards and had to bite hard on her lower lip to prevent a cry from escaping. It would be better, she decided, when they were on the main road.

She knew at once when they were, for the car picked up speed, its engine purring happily as it was given work to do. Diana discovered that if she sat properly with her back right up against the door and her legs stretched before her she still could not be seen by the driver because of the height of the backs of the front seats, so she settled down to be as comfortable as she could for the thirty-five minutes or so it would take Jose to get to the sugar factory.

Once they arrived there what would she do then? How typical of her not to have thought that far. Her one desire had been to escape from the *hacienda*. Would she be able to leave the car without Jose hearing her? She doubted it. But what if he did hear her? Wouldn't he be too amazed to do anything to prevent her from leaving? Yes, that was it; surprise would be her ally and she would run as fast as she could. Where? Which way? Diana frowned and chewed her lower lip. She had only seen the factory from a distance, on the way from the

landing strip the day she had arrived in Puno. She had no idea how far it was from the hotel.

Still, it couldn't be very far. Puno wasn't a big town. She would find her way somehow and even if Luis Guillermo followed her he could hardly kidnap her in a public street. Or could he? She must remember that this was topsyturvy land, Ecuador, where the most unusual events and incidents were regarded as commonplace so that no one in the street would regard it as strange if a car drew up beside her and she was snatched into it.

She shook her head. She must not let her imagination run away with her. First things first. She must get to Puno first then take the next step to wherever it might lead her.

The car turned and she guessed they were crossing another bridge. Two to go and they would be almost in Puno. Although she was glad of the air-conditioning she was beginning to wish she had brought a cardigan, just as she had wished the same the previous evening. She held her arms close to her body to prevent herself from shivering. Perhaps she was suffering from reaction because her little plan had worked.

What would Jason say when she told him of her escapade? Would he laugh? Would he be there to laugh? Oh, she hoped so, she hoped so! She rested her head on her hunched-up knees and thought about him, willing him to be there at the hotel when she arrived. If he was there and he had read her note he would be surprised when she walked in. Surprised and glad? Glad enough to drop his guard? Glad enough to scoop her up into his arms and kiss her? Glad enough to love her again as she knew now she loved him? Oh, she hoped so, she hoped so!

The car swerved over the last bridge and took the steep hill down to Puno, slowly and carefully, twisting beside the river. Soon they were

in the town and Diana could see houses through the window opposite, wooden galleries and glinting windows. The car took several turns and came to a stop. She could see a grey adobe wall and guessed they had reached the factory.

Jose was whistling, the tune he had whistled all the way, a jolly little tune which she did not know but which she knew she would never forget. She waited, undecided what to do next, and to her relief he opened his door, stepped out, slammed the door shut and walked away.

Slowly she raised herself up, leaning on the back seat so that she could see through the window. People were coming out of the factory. The best plan would be to behave normally, open the door of the car, step out of it and mingle with the crowd of workers who were walking towards the arched entrance.

Quickly she sat up, feeling pins and needles sting her feet and legs. She opened the door, stepped out and, without waiting to see whether Jose was there and had noticed her, she walked towards the archway with the crowd of laughing and chattering work-people.

Outside a narrow muddy lane led down to the main street. Pleased because she recognised the street and so would soon be able to get her bearings and find the hotel, still elated because her plan of escape had worked, Diana hurried down the lane as fast as the hot humid air would let her.

Clouds hovered thick and grey in the sky. All colour seemed to have seeped away from the town which was rapidly growing darker as the storm which had threatened all afternoon loomed closer. In the main street there was feverish activity as Indians who had been holding their weekly market gathered up their goods, bundled them in shawls or strips of cloth, slung them over their backs and started the trek back to their villages. A couple of jeeps, with the name of the oil

company on their doors, rattled past and stopped just ahead of Diana. Hard-hatted men jumped out of them and disappeared into one of the many taverns.

As she turned into the street which led down to the small square near the river the gleam of the little church welcomed her. It seemed to her that the hotel looked seedier than ever. Several men were sitting on the old wicker chairs, booted feet on the rail, bottles and glasses on the tables beside them. One of them called to Diana in Spanish as she passed and there was a roar of mocking laughter as she looked away quickly and hurried through the doors.

For the first time since she had arrived the hotel seemed to be busy, full of the sound of voices. In the bar someone was playing the old juke box and rowdy music blared forth so that people had to shout to make themselves heard. There was no sign of Gerda, so Diana sidled round a group of men who were standing talking in the hall and made for the stairs.

The bedroom was almost dark when she entered. She closed the door and after making sure the screen was in place at the window, she went to the bedside and switched on the lamp.

The tension which had kept her going ever since she had left that other bedroom at the *hacienda* eased out of her, leaving her as limp as a rag. She realised her dress was glued to her with perspiration and that her hair was damp for the same reason. Going to the chest of drawers, she opened the bottle of water which was there and poured some into a glass. It was tepid, but it was wet, and liquid was what she craved most of all at that moment. She drank two glassfuls, and it was as she set the glass down for the second time that she noticed that the note she had left for Jason had gone.

She glanced round the room, seeing for the first time the crumpled, soiled clothing thrown down in one corner, a shirt and a pair of

cotton trousers. Then she saw the zipped holdall in which he had carried the clothing he required from Quito. It was on the floor beside a chair. He was back!

Diana's heart gave an excited leap and then she told it not to be silly. Although she had returned to Puno for the specific reason of seeing him again she mustn't expect too much from him. In fact she mustn't expect anything. There was still so much to be talked over between them and there was the distinct possibility that the result of their talking things over might be unpleasant.

But she had to get out of this dress, she thought, and went to the cupboard in search of alternative clothing. Only her denim trouser suit hung there. The rest of her dresses were at the *hacienda*.

In desperation she pulled open a drawer in the chest and searched for a bikini she knew she had brought with her. It was there. Quickly she slipped out of the dress and underwear and pulled on the yellow briefs and bodice of the bikini. Standing in front of the damp-mottled mirror, she combed her hair, lifting it from her scalp. Bare feet, the minimum of clothing and the feel of a comb through her hair seemed like luxuries in the turgid atmosphere of the hot room.

The door opened and she turned towards it, her nerves jumping a little. Jason came in looking bigger than ever in a white singlet which left bare his powerful shoulders and arms and pale khaki shorts the brevity of which showed off the muscularity of his long legs. He was carrying two bottles and a glass. He kicked the door shut behind him with a sandalled foot, looked up and saw her.

'Well, well, this is a surprise,' he drawled with an unpleasant lift of his upper lip as his glance raked insolently over her barely-clad figure. 'What's brought you back?'

He walked across to the bedside table and set down the bottles and the glass. Twisting the top off one bottle, he poured some of its contents into the glass, took a sip of the liquor, then opened the other bottle which Diana guessed contained some carbonated liquid because it gurgled as he added it to the liquor in the glass.

Picking up the glass again, he turned to look at her.

'Like some?' he asked casually.

'What is it?' she asked cautiously.

'Whisky. Ginger ale.'

'I'll have some ginger ale, please.'

'Help yourself,' he replied, and kicking off his sandals he sat on the bed and swung his legs up on to it.

Glass in hand, Diana approached the table and poured some of the ginger ale. Very much aware of him, she glanced sideways at him. The light from the lamp burnished the sun-bronzed skin of his bulky shoulders. The tautness of the straps of the white singlet and its close fit across his broad chest served to emphasize his masculinity. She noticed that he needed a shave and that the blur of blond beard drew attention to the angle of his jaw, the shape of his mouth and the gleam of his eyes. The fairness of his hair was darkened with sweat.

Closeness to him while they were both so scantily dressed in that hot room was dangerous and, after pouring some ginger ale into her glass, she moved round the bed to the other side of the room to look out of the window while she sipped the bubbly, tingling liquid. It wasn't fair, she thought crossly, that he was so physically attractive to her. It gave him an advantage over her every time they met.

'You haven't answered my question,' he prompted lazily. 'Why have you come back?'

'To see you,' she replied.

'Expect me to believe that?' he asked, and she quivered in reaction to his scepticism.

'It's the truth,' she asserted.

'Is it?' he drawled cynically.

She spun round, her eyes wide. In spite of the lamplight it was difficult to read the expression on his face, but she could see he was returning her startled glance with an alert, wide-open one of his own as he emptied the glass and set it down on the table. He folded his arms across his chest, leaned back and stared at her again.

'We've done this scene before, haven't we?' he jeered. 'Only the last time the boot was on your foot. You didn't believe me when I told you I was telling you the truth. Now how does it feel to be on the receiving end of distrust?'

It was a horrible dream she was having. It must be. She took a few steps towards the bed to the edge of the circle of light.

'Didn't you read my note?' she asked.

'I read your note,' he replied coldly. 'It told me you'd gone away for a couple of days with Luis Guillermo. It seems you couldn't wait here for me to return.'

'But I told you I'd be back. I told you he'd invited you to come to the *hacienda* too,' she argued desperately.

Scepticism twisted his mouth and gleamed in his eyes before he turned away to pour some more liquor into his glass, but he said nothing.

'Jason, surely you don't ...' she began, then broke off, caught her breath furiously and began again. 'You can't believe I went With him because I like him and that he and I ... Oh, no! It's too horrible!' She turned away to the window again where flying insects were beating out their lives as they banged against the unyielding mesh of the screen in an effort to get into the room. 'You should know he means nothing to me,' she went on in a low voice. 'I met him for the first time yesterday.'

'So what?' he drawled nastily. 'From all I've heard about him I guess he still has what it takes to attract some women. I've also heard that he has a reputation for choosing young women who've already been married to be his mistresses. That way he doesn't get accused of seducing the innocent, I suppose.'

'Well, I'm not attracted by him. And I've no wish to be his mistress or the mistress of any other man. I don't like him, and this afternoon I ran away from the *hacienda* rather than stay another night in his house,' she declared, her voice ringing out. 'And I came back here to see you. I did, honestly.'

'Big deal,' Jason drawled sarcastically.

Feeling like one of the insects which was bashing itself against the screen as frustration rose within her because she wasn't getting through to him, Diana stared out at the square. The walls of the little church were starkly white against the lowering clouds and were patterned with yellow oblongs of light from the candles which burned within it.

'You still don't believe me?' she queried in a furious whisper.

'Why should I? You're as capable of telling lies as the next woman is. Words come easily to you and often they mean nothing. For example, how often did you say, "I love you, Jason", when we made love, yet when you were put to the test when a demand was made on your love it collapsed like a deflated balloon. You didn't love me, you loved only the idea of being married to me, of being able to show me off as your husband to your girl friends.'

He stopped on a note of disgust. Quivering from the bitter blast of his words, Diana turned round in time to see him drain the glass he was holding, set it down and pour some more whisky into it.

A strange light-headedness came over her and she remembered she had eaten nothing since breakfast time. Quickly she sat down on the edge of the bed. Somehow she had to persist, convince him that even if she hadn't loved him properly in the first few months of marriage she loved him now and wanted a chance to prove that she did.

'You used not to drink,' she observed.

'How do you know?' he countered. 'Because I didn't drink much when I was with you, you assumed I didn't drink at all. You assumed a lot about me—too much, and a lot of it wrong.'

Bewildered by his bitterness, she glanced at the bottle of whisky and then back at him. His teeth glinted white as he laughed at her.

'Oh, I can see how your mind is working,' he scoffed. 'You regard liquor as an anodyne to pain, don't you, as something which deadens the sharp edge of memory and makes forgetfulness easy. And at once that fertile imagination of yours leaps ahead and you say to yourself, he must be drinking to forget something.' He paused, looked down at the glass he was holding and smiled sardonically. 'Okay, I'll go along with that idea. I have been trying to forget something over the past few months, but I haven't been drinking to do it.'

'What do you want to forget?' she asked.

'A girl I used to know.' Above the rim of the glass his eyes glinted with mockery. He raised the glass slightly as if in a toast. 'Here's to her memory,' he said, and drank.

'Was her name Carol?' she said, not looking at him in case his face showed pain at the mention of the name.

'Carol?' he exclaimed, setting the glass down sharply and sitting up straight, away from the headboard. 'Who is she?'

There was no doubt he was surprised, and his surprise gave her hope.

'The woman you went to see in Paris. She wrote to you inviting you to go there,' Diana muttered uneasily, staring down at the wedding ring on her finger, twisting it round and round.

In the silence which lay between them she could hear the sound of beat music being thumped out by the jukebox in the bar downstairs, and the voices of men shouting and laughing. It seemed as if some sort of celebration was going on.

'How do you know that?' demanded Jason with ominous quietness. 'I didn't tell you.'

Diana licked her lips. It was now or never, she thought. Tonight everything had to be made plain and straight between them. Only then could they come to any decision about the future.

'That morning, the day you left for Houston, the letter fell out of the pocket of one of the shirts you'd dropped on the floor of the hall and I ...' Her throat closed up. She tried to clear it.

'And you read it,' he accused softly.

'Yes,' she admitted dully.

'So now we're getting somewhere at last,' he murmured thoughtfully. He was quiet for a moment, then burst out with a violence which startled her. 'Why the hell didn't you tell me then, before I left?'

Her head came up. Her eyes flickered with fear because he was angry, really furiously angry, his big hands balled into fists, his broad chest heaving, his breath hissing between parted lips, his eyes glittering with dark menace.

'Because ... I... I... thought you'd be angry with me and accuse me of prying. Oh, Jason, don't look like that,' she cried. 'I'm sorry I read it, but I've been punished enough for reading it without you punishing me now.'

'Oh, God,' he groaned, and sank back against the headboard, his hands covering his face. 'When I think of all the time wasted ...' He broke off, took a shaken seething breath, lowered his hands and glared at her.

'So that's why you didn't believe me,' he muttered through taut lips.

She nodded, unable to speak because he was looking at her as if he would very much like to hit her.

'And you let me go on thinking it was because of what Eunice had told you, because you trusted her but didn't trust me,' he groaned.

'But you didn't trust me either,' she accused.

'What do you mean?' he said sharply.

'You ... you said once that a marriage like ours was based on trust. But if you'd trusted me you'd have told me who Carol was and why you went to see her,' she replied.

For a moment they stared at each other. The whirring of the electrically driven fan on the ceiling, the banging of the insects against the screen, the thumping of the music from below, all seemed to emphasize the heat and tension in the room.

Jason sighed, a long sigh of exasperation, and reached out an arm to pick up the glass which he had set down. He looked down at the remains of the drink rather moodily, then tossed it off and put down the glass again.

'Looks like we're back to that day, doesn't it?' he drawled wearily. 'I've just come back from Paris and you've read that letter. Why don't we take it from there?'

'All right. I'll be glad to,' she said. Here was a chance to put things straight, the chance she had hoped for. 'Please will you tell me who Carol is ... or was?'

'Is,' he sighed. 'She's my cousin from Texas, my Uncle Bill's youngest daughter. I guess I've always thought of her more as a kid sister than as a cousin because she was always around when I lived with Uncle Bill. She's clever and went to the Sorbonne to take a doctorate in languages— French and Spanish. That's why she was living in Paris.'

Diana was silent, thinking back to the urgent appeal expressed in the letter and realising that it could have been from someone who thought of Jason as an older brother, as a well-loved and much-trusted person who would help in time of need.

'Don't you want to know why I went to see her?' he asked.

'If you want to tell me,' she mumbled. He had been telling the truth after all when he had said he had been to Paris on family business,

but she had been too jealous to listen properly. She had heard only what Eunice had said—a little blonde girl swinging on his arm.

'It was a delicate situation,' he said slowly. 'Something had happened to her that she didn't want anyone to know about. She asked me to go and see her because I was the only person she felt she could confide in. I couldn't split on her—not for a while—and I just had to hope you would understand.' He hesitated, then added in a low voice, 'I didn't know you very well.'

Was that meant to be an apology for not trusting her sufficiently to tell her about Carol? Or was he implying that even if he had known her better at the time he wouldn't have trusted her anyway? Diana couldn't be sure, but she had to make her own effort at apologising for her mistake.

'And I didn't know you very well either, or I would never have ..She couldn't continue because she was suddenly racked by a terrible feeling of regret for all the months they had lost through hurt pride and misunderstanding.

'Where is Carol now?' she asked, blinking back the tears which had rushed to her eyes.

'In Texas, with her parents. Last letter I had from her said the baby is doing fine.'

'Baby?' she exclaimed.

'That's what I said, and that was the trouble she was in,' Jason paused and gave her an underbrowed glance. 'I guess I can tell you now. She fell in love with a Frenchman and when she told him she was going to have his child he let her down. He was married already and he hadn't told her. She was in a pretty bad way when she wrote to me.'

She was thinking of committing suicide, not because she was pregnant, but because he'd let her down.'

He leaned his head back against the headboard and closed his eyes. She heard the bristles on his chin rustle as he rubbed a hand across his face. She waited, knowing there was more to come when he could find a way to tell her.

'To understand why she appealed to me and not to her parents you have to know Carol as well as Uncle Bill and Aunt Sadie. Being the clever one of the family she was the apple of their eye, could do no wrong. They were and still are very proud of her scholastic accomplishments. She felt she couldn't hurt them by telling them what had happened to her. I stayed with her two days out of the three I had available before flying to Houston. I phoned Uncle Bill and told him what had happened. As I'd hoped, he said I was to send her home on the first plane on which I could book a reservation for her. I managed to talk her into going, then flew to London, to you. Carol saw me off at the airport.' His mouth twisted. 'I guess Eunice saw us saying goodbye. Carol was happy and grateful and was showing her feelings.'

Her head bowed, Diana struggled with her own feelings.. They were compounded of shame and regret; shame because she been guilty of thinking the worst of Jason when in fact by going to Paris to help his cousin he had acted from the best of motives and had shown his deep concern and compassion for other people which wasn't obvious on the surface.

'I wish I'd known,' she cried out of her distress. 'Oh, how I wish I'd known!'

He was silent. Perhaps he was thinking, as she was, how foolish they had both been to distrust each other and so destroy wilfully their

tender vulnerable relationship before it had had time to put out strong roots.

It was now completely dark and inside the room, beyond the circle of light, the shadows were black. Diana was acutely aware of Jason. She had only to reach out a hand to touch his bare leg and rub the golden hairs which covered it the wrong way as she caressed it upwards over his knee to sink her fingers into the sinewy hardness of his thigh. The longing to do so became an ache in the pit of her stomach. She could sit near him no longer. Getting to her feet, she went once again to the window.

All she could see now through the pattern of the mesh screen were the lights of the church, yellow oblongs shining through the velvet blackness of the equatorial night. The atmosphere was sultry, the air so thick with heat that it was almost tangible and above the dreary repetitive sounds of the beat music she thought she heard the distant rumble of thunder.

'It sounds as if the men downstairs are celebrating,' she commented.

'They are. They tapped another geyser of oil today, a big one. They're pretty exultant about it,' he replied indifferently.

'Why aren't you celebrating with them?' she asked.

'I didn't feel I had anything to celebrate about, right now,' he replied dryly.

'But surely it means the survey has been successful, doesn't it?'

'I suppose so.' His lack of interest surprised her. She had always thought his work was all-important to him, more important than his wife.

'Does it mean your job in Ecuador is at an end?' she persisted, thinking that might be the reason he was disconsolate.

'I'm not sure.'

His laconic answers were beginning to irritate her, but she set her teeth clamping down on irritation. She was learning the hard way that it didn't do to get irritated with Jason. He only closed up, became more and more laconic if she did.

'Where will your next job be?' she asked. The answer to the question might give her some idea of how he felt about Rosa. Now that the matter of Carol had been cleared up she had to find out who was the girl he had been trying to forget. She could be Rosa.

'I'm thinking of staying in Ecuador,' he replied slowly. 'I like the country and the people. I was born here and my father died here, so I feel I have some close connections with the place.'

An echo of something he had said two years ago when they had lain side by side on top of a windy cliff in Cornwall echoed through her mind. It has been in answer to her plea to him to get a job which would keep him in one place. He had said: *Not yet. I'm not ready. Maybe one day, but not here, not in this country.*

Now it-seemed he was ready and it was to be here in this topsy-turvy country, the people of which he liked. Was it because he liked one person in particular? Was it because he loved Rosa?

'I'd stay with the company. Gary is due to be transferred. I could have his job,' he added.

Of course he was the grandson of a one-time vice-president of the company and the nephew of another. He could pull strings to get what he wanted. But somehow Diana didn't think Jason was like that.

He would only want promotion if he thought he had earned it and was worthy of it; only if it really fitted in with his plans for his own life to have it.

'Is that why you've been looking for a house to buy in Quito?' she asked.

'Who told you I was?' he demanded sharply. 'Hell, a man can't keep a thing to himself in this place!'

'Gerda told me. She said you told her once you were thinking of buying a house. She thinks that's why I'm here.'

'I was, but that was some time back.' He laughed, a rather dreary, cynical sound. 'I had one of those crazy dreams about having a home, of staying in one place for a while, perhaps raising a couple of children ...'

'And who did you dream would be their mother? Rosa Guillermo?'

Diana spoke sharply out of new pain which was stabbing her, then she flinched as Jason swore violently, the harshness of his voice seeming to rip the thick humid air just as the lightning cracked apart the blackness of the sky above the church with a vivid orange flash. She heard the bed creak in protest as he left it. His fingers dug into the soft flesh of her upper arm as he jerked her round to face him.

Instinctively she flung up her other arm to stave off the slap she was sure he intended to give her, only lowering it when she heard him speaking to her, each word short and sharp like a series of stinging slaps.

'No, I don't go in for hitting women, even though you deserve it for that crack. Nothing has changed, has it? You still distrust me. Last year it was Carol in Paris. This year it's Rosa in Ecuador. The only

difference I can see is you didn't have your little friend Eunice here to put you wise this time.'

A vein pulsed blue at his right temple. His eyes blazed blue fire at her. His face was ashen beneath the tan as if someone had given him a blow to the body and beads of sweat stood out on his forehead.

'Jason ... I'm sorry,' she quavered. His fingers seemed to be searing the skin of her arm. 'I ... I shouldn't have said that.'

'Too late. It's said, and it's given me a good idea of what you think of me. You thought it up all on your own, didn't you?'

'No, no, I didn't,' she flared shakily, wrenching her arm from his grasp and rubbing it nervously with her hand. 'It was Rosa. She was on about it all morning; about how she made you happy by playing her guitar to you, by riding donkeys with you. Oh, it was awful! I... I hated her.' She pressed her hands against her temples, Veins were throbbing there too, as overheated blood surged through them. 'That's why I couldn't stay there any longer.'

He frowned and gnawed with straight-edged teeth at his lower lip and she knew she had disconcerted him. He turned away from her, thrusting his hands into the pockets of his brief shorts.

'What else did she say?' he asked stiltedly as if making an effort to control his anger and appear casual.

'That she had asked you to be her husband. She didn't know you were married. You didn't tell her. You didn't tell anyone, and I can't understand why.' She paused, waited hopefully for an explanation, but Jason merely shrugged his shoulders, so she continued, 'When she realised who I was she thought I'd come out to Ecuador to arrange to divorce you.'

'And haven't you?' he demanded. 'Come on, now, be honest. Hadn't the idea of divorce entered your head?'

'Yes,' she admitted reluctantly, 'but only because someone put it there.'

'Eunice?' he drawled, half turning to cock an enquiring eyebrow at her.

'Yes. And Paul.'

'Ha!' His crack of laughter was cynical. 'That figures.'

'Why does it? Why do you say that?' she asked. 'What do you know about them that I don't know?'

He swivelled on bare heels to face her. Hands on his hips, he looked down at her as if he saw her as someone very young who was in need of guidance, in the same way as he had possibly looked at his cousin Carol when she had needed his help. Diana wasn't sure she wanted to be looked at like that by him. It made her feel as if she wasn't qualified to be his wife, but only to be his kid sister.

'Quite a lot,' he said. 'You know I'd met them both before that dinner where I met you—never mind how or where now. I'd even taken Eunice out a few times when I'd been in London, to a couple of concerts and to dinner.' A faint enigmatical smile curved his mouth. 'She didn't measure up to my standards,' he added, and suddenly Diana realised why Eunice had been jealous of her. Eunice had fallen in love with him, had wanted him, but he had given her the brush-off and had married herself instead.

'As for Paul,' he went on, 'he had it all planned to marry his boss's daughter—you—to make sure of his future with a successful company. Anyone with any knowledge of the world could have

guessed what his angle was—anyone, that is, except an unworldly innocent like you were then.' He let out a sigh, pushed the damp fronds of hair back from his forehead and said with a touch of diffidence, 'Is that why you came here? Does Paul still want to marry you and you'd like to marry him if only you could be rid of me?'

'Oh, I've told you once I didn't know you were in Ecuador,' she said quickly.

'But Chris knew I was here, and you went to him with your problem, didn't you?' he said, his eyes hard and shrewd.

'Yes, but only because I wasn't sure when Paul made the suggestion. I had to think about it and Daddy suggested I should take a holiday with him.' She stared up at him, trying to understand what lay behind his questions. 'Oh, Jason,' she whispered. 'Is it what you want? Do you want to be free of me so you can marry Rosa? Is she the girl you've been trying to forget? Is she the one you were thinking of buying a house for?'

He turned away from her and paced over to the doorway. He paused there and looked back at her, but since he was in the shadows she could not see him properly.

'If I said yes, that's what I want, what would you do?' he challenged gruffly.

It was her turn to swing away, afraid he might see the hurt in her eyes and her blanched cheeks. So it had come. This was the moment of truth when she had to make that decision from which she had been running away. Hand to her mouth to stop it from trembling, she looked out at the lightning flickering across the sky. Her skin felt clammy and envy of Rosa was making her feel sick. She couldn't bear to think of him and Rosa together.

'You're taking a long time to think up an answer,' he chided softly right behind her, yet she hadn't heard him move across the room.

'I... I'd give you a divorce so you could marry her,' she replied in a muffled voice.

There was a brief tense silence between them during which thunder rumbled ominously.

'Just like that?' queried Jason flatly.

'Yes.'

'Well, I'd say that's mighty generous of you,' he remarked drily, and it seemed to Diana that the roar of raucous laughter from the room below was a jeering accompaniment to his comment.

Aware that something wasn't quite right, she whirled to face him. He was standing very close to her, so close she could smell the whisky on his breath and could see the sheen of sweat on the smooth curves of his shoulders. The closeness of him, the sheer warm masculinity assaulted her senses in such a way that she found it difficult to think clearly. She wanted nothing more than to fling her arms around him and hold him closer, to press herself against him. Swallowing hard to repress the feeling, she stepped back a pace.

'Since you're in such a magnanimous mood tonight,' he continued softly, 'perhaps you wouldn't mind doing something else for me.'

'Oh, what is it?' she asked, forcing herself to look at him and then stepping back another pace as she recognised the darkening of his eyes. 'Daddy said we should talk things over. It's the only way, he said,' she added nervously.

'He's pretty wise,' Jason drawled condescendingly. 'And I'm glad he's brought you here, but there are other ways besides talking.'

He raised a hand and rubbed his knuckles gently along her jaw from its point to the angle near her ear. There his fingers uncurled to slide round to the nape of her neck. The touch of them against her skin made a tingle go down her spine. She pressed back against them, hearing her heart thundering in her ears in reaction to this new turn of events.

'What do you want me to do?' she whispered.

'Something we do well together,' he replied. 'Something I've every right to expect from you as your husband.' His glance lingered insinuatingly on her mouth and the pressure of his hand increased against the back of her neck to draw her closer to him.

She wanted it to happen. Her senses were all crying out to her mind to let it happen. But she couldn't let it happen, not now, not after all the talk of divorce, so she placed her hands against his chest in an attempt to keep him off.

'No, Jason,' she whispered fiercely.

'Why not?' he countered. 'We're still married, so it's perfectly legal, and there isn't much else to do in Puno on a hot stormy night like this except to make love.'

Make love, make love. The phrase danced around in her mind to the accompaniment of the jukebox music and the rumble of thunder. Jason was interested only in making love to her, not in really loving her. That was all he had ever been interested in, and now, back from the jungle where he had been working hard, he sought some sort of entertainment and she happened to be handy and his wife into the bargain.

'No! It wouldn't mean anything,' she objected hotly, trying to push him away.

'But I can assure you, sweetheart, it would mean a lot to me,' he retorted cheekily as he grasped her hands with one of his and forced them down. Then he put his arms around her so that her arms were jammed closely against her body and she couldn't move them. Even so she wriggled in an effort to avoid him as he bent his head to kiss her.

'Not like this, Jason,' she cried out. 'Not like this, while there's still so much to be explained. Oh, Jason, don't you understand? I can't, I can't!'

His mouth touched her averted cheek. It slid gently to the corner of her mouth and she felt his tongue flicker tantalisingly against her lips. His hands moved caressingly over her bare back, their palms rough against the smoothness of her skin. Fingers slid under the fastening of the bikini bodice and unhooked it.

She tried to hold herself stiffly in his embrace, to remain aloof, but all the time desire was awakening slowly and joyously within her, making her ache for his touch. She longed to give in and slide her hands over the smooth bare bulk of his shoulders to take sensuous pleasure in the feel of damp warm skin; to let her fingers slip inside the waistband of his shorts; to make love to him as he had taught her to do when they had first been married.

'I can't, Jason,' she groaned.

'No?' The familiar irony mocked her. 'Then I'll have to see what I can do in the way of making you, won't I?'

'If... if you take me by force... I'll never forgive you,' she muttered desperately.

'But you know by now that I'm not much interested in being forgiven,' he murmured close to her ear, and she felt the roughness of

his chin tickle her neck. Then he bit the tip of the lobe of her ear. A tiny pain shot through her, jolting every sense into life. She cried out, her stiffness melted into softness and she swayed against him. In that moment his mouth closed with authority over hers and he lifted her from the floor as if she were a doll.

She felt extraordinarily helpless being held in that way. She kicked his shins and banged at his shoulders, without effect. He walked relentlessly towards the bed. She tried twisting her head to escape from the domination of his kiss, but his lips gripped hers in the most brutally possessive kiss she had ever known.

Down on the bed she went and he was with her all the way, his weight holding her down -against the sagging mattress. The bed creaked ominously in reaction to the shock and she wondered with a sudden giddy desire to laugh if it would collapse beneath them.

He released her mouth slowly. Hard brutality gave way to a soft sweetness as he moved his lips against hers as if he wanted to smooth away the bruises he had caused. With one hand he pulled down the loosened bikini bodice and the touch of his lips against the soft swell of her skin was like the flicker of flames. -

'It's been a long time, golden girl,' he murmured against her with a sigh, and at once the last of the ice which had kept her bound melted at last. Her eager arms enfolded him to cradle his head against her breast.

But being Jason he didn't stay cradled for long. He raised his head abruptly, breaking the clasp of her hands. He framed her face in his own hands as he looked down at her. Mockery glinted in the darkness of his eyes and his mouth lifted at one corner in a familiar beloved slant of derision.

'Now what was that you were saying about force?' he taunted. 'Seems to me there's no resistance, so force won't be necessary.'

'Oh.' That was as far as she could get by way of retaliation, because his mouth descended on hers again and her mind and body fused together in wholehearted, joyous response.

Neither of them heard the sudden drumming of rain on the iron roof of the verandah because they were too swamped by their own private storm of passion which, unleashed as abruptly as the rain which fell outside, swept over them with violence, making them oblivious to a mere storm in the jungle. Familiar with each other's needs, they found their pleasure intensified by the heat as well as by their long absence from each other, so that when the climax came it was a triumph as well as a release.

For a while they lay half asleep in each other's arms, yet still wakeful enough to indulge in an occasional caress.

'I can hear a funny noise,' murmured Jason eventually. 'It seems to be coming from you.'

'It's my tummy,' she said. 'I'm hungry. I haven't eaten since breakfast time.'

'Why not?' he asked, sitting up in one lithe movement and propping himself on one arm he looked down at her. Diana gazed up at him from under heavy eyelids. Never could she get enough of seeing him like this, she thought, with his skin gleaming in the lamplight and the symmetry of his bare muscular body seeming like that of a sculpture of a Greek Olympian athlete she had once seen in a museum of fine arts.

Speaking slowly because she felt too lazily content to make much effort, she told him of how she had escaped from the *hacienda*. While he listened he stroked her arm. When she had finished he laughed.

'You little devil!' he accused. 'Just imagine the hell which Luis Guillermo is going through as he wonders where you are tonight.'

'Oh. I never thought of that.' She sat up, suddenly concerned, hugging her arms about herself. 'Perhaps we ought to phone him to tell him I'm all right.'

'No.' Jason was quite firm as he swung off the bed to grab his shorts from the floor and step into them. 'Let him stew. It'll serve him right for taking you there in the first place,' he added as he went towards the door.

'Where are you going?' she asked rather diffidently. Always when he opened a door to go through it and leave her behind she would have this fear that he would never come back again. He looked back at her and grinned.

'To get you some food so that your tummy will stop protesting,' he replied. 'Come to think of it, I'm hungry myself. Don't worry, I'll be back. The night isn't over yet.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

DIANA sighed and came awake without opening her eyes. She stretched her legs and at once became aware of a lovely feeling of ease, an absence of tension in her body. For a moment she lay there luxuriating in the sensation and smiling to herself as she remembered why she felt that way.

Slowly she turned on to her side and reached out blindly for Jason. Her hand touched only the crumpled cotton bedcover on which they had lain all through the steamy night. Opening her eyes, she sat up quickly. The room was full of grey early morning light. Outside the window drops of water fell from the overhanging roof on to the verandah roof with a pinging sound. The rain had stopped.

Knowledge that she was alone came to her like a swift sharp blow to the heart. Draping the cotton bedspread around her barenness, she swung off the bed and padded about the room looking for signs of Jason. Everything belonging to him had gone, which meant he had gone too. Frantically she searched the top of the chest of drawers, the bedside table, anywhere where he might have left a note. But there was nothing.

For a moment she stood looking down at the bed and pushing back the damp hair from her face. Then, with a groan, moving very slowly as if she had actually been physically wounded, she crawled back on to the bed and lay down again, huddling under the bedcover as if the temperature in the room was cool instead of near blood heat.

As Jason had said last night, nothing had changed, she thought miserably. Their relationship was still a make-love-and-run-affair which had been legalised by a civil contract in London two years ago. It wasn't a marriage in the proper sense at all, and she had been foolish to hope, as she had at one point during the night when it had seemed to her that they had achieved perfect union of souls and

bodies, that their lovemaking had resolved the situation more satisfactorily than talking had done.

But nothing had been resolved, and Jason's abrupt departure this morning had destroyed her hope. If he loved her, really loved her, wouldn't he have asked her to go with him? Wouldn't he have told her last night that he had to go away again this morning? Wouldn't he have left a note for her explaining where he had gone as she had left one for him?

Oh, what a fool she had been to give in to him! But then had she had any choice? Once he had decided to use his undoubted expertise as a lover her own traitorous body had made the choice for her. And now he had left her again and she had no idea when or where she might see him again, if she ever did see him again, for she knew enough about the workings of the male mind to realise that his lovemaking of the previous night had not committed him to her in any way.

Clenching her fists in a fury of frustration, Diana beat the rather soggy pillow, wishing quite fiercely that she could be like some young women she knew who were able to make love without becoming emotionally involved. But it was a vain wish. She had never been like that. Jason was the only man she had ever known who could turn her on, and now she knew why. It was because she loved him, and that was why she was so possessive about him and why the green fire of jealousy burned through her every time she heard another woman's name mentioned in connection with him.

At least she wasn't jealous of Carol any more. In fact now that she knew that Carol was a relative she felt she would like to meet her and see her baby. She rolled on to her back and smoothed both hands over her flat stomach. She would like to carry Jason's child, and she remembered with a little leap of excitement that neither of them had taken any precautions the previous night.

But the thought of having a baby brought back the memory of the taunt she had flung at him about Rosa. How furious he had been, furious and hurt. Why? Had his reaction meant that he cared very much for Rosa? Diana groaned again and turned to bury her face in the pillow as if by doing so she could blot out the memory of his reaction. She still didn't know how he felt about Rosa or if he wanted a divorce so he could marry the woman. He had been noncommittal about that too.

Uncommitted, untamed, a law to himself—yes, that was Jason, and she wouldn't want him to be any other way, her beloved rough diamond who came and went as he chose and expected her to understand. If only she didn't have this fear that he might never come again!

Her stomach gurgled noisily, reminding her that she had had very little to eat the previous day, and suddenly she was laughing as she remembered how it had gurgled in the night and Jason had gone to fetch some food for her. He had brought back a plateful of *empanadas*, unsweetened pastry cases stuffed with spicy meat and cheese, and two bottles of beer. They had sat on the bed sharing the feast and afterwards had made love again.

Her laughter subsided, leaving her feeling more melancholy than ever. It was such shared moments with Jason which bound her to him and which she would never be able to forget. They were part of loving him. If only she could be sure they bound him to her, that he remembered them!

No longer able to bear the torment of thinking about him, she scrambled off the bed and began to search for clothing, realising belatedly that most of it was at the *hacienda* and that she would have to wear the denim suit. As she dressed she thought of Luis Guillermo wondering what he had done when he had found she had gone. He must have been concerned, she had no doubt about that and her

conscience pricked her a little. Jason should have phoned the *hacienda* for her and told Luis she was back in Puno. She frowned a little, wondering why he had refused. She had a feeling he didn't like Luis for some reason.

Downstairs in the entrance hall of the hotel Gerda was at the reception desk, old-fashioned spectacles perched on her small button of a nose as she reckoned up accounts. The place was quiet, back to its normal slumbrous atmosphere after the rowdyism of the night before, and the stale smell of tobacco smoke lingered in the heavy air.

Gerda looked up, saw Diana and blinked. She took off her spectacles and looked again.

'*Gott in Himmel!*' she exclaimed. 'You are here all the time.'

'Yes, I came back yesterday afternoon. I would have told you, but I couldn't find you and there were such a lot of people about I went straight upstairs,' explained Diana. 'I thought Jason might have told you I was back when he came downstairs to get some food for us.'

'I did not see him then. I saw him only after he had returned with the other men. He was not in a good mood and would not join in their celebration party. He went out on his own. I did not see him come back.'

'Have you seen him this morning?' Diana asked hesitantly. She hated having to admit that Jason had gone without her knowing when and where.

'No, but I know he was leaving today because he settled his account with me yesterday. He paid for you to stay two more nights. Is that okay with you, *senora*?'

'Oh, yes, yes ... I suppose so.' Diana's mind was in a turmoil. Why hadn't Jason told her all this? More than ever she was becoming convinced that he was determined to leave her for ever.

'What I do not understand,' said Gerda speaking slowly, 'is that you are here and yet Senor Sugar himself came just a few minutes ago demanding to know if you were here, and when I tell him ho, you are at his *hacienda*, he is very upset. Ach, what is it you have done to put him in such a state?'

'Luis Guillermo was here this morning? Oh, where is he now?' squeaked Diana.

'He has gone to the hospital, where else? To tell your father you are missing and are possibly lost in the jungle near the *hacienda*.'

'Oh, no!'

All thought of breakfast forgotten, Diana sped to the door, and as she swung it open Gerda called after her.

'Where are you going now? I must know, *senora*. Someone else might come looking for you.'

'To the hospital.'

It was impossible to hurry up the lane. The overnight downpour had turned it into a mud bath and every pothole seemed like a lake full of brackish brown water. But as she went the sun came out so that the water glinted with reflected light and the leaves of the eucalyptus and palms, which were wet and dripping, green and fresh, glistened. On the sagging telephone wire the green parrots chattered cheekily and a woman from one of the houses, who was tidying up her garden, called out a cheery *buenos días* to her.

Outside the hospital the Cadillac was parked. Jose was in the driver's seat whistling, as usual, judging by the pursing of his mouth, and he did not notice her.

Diana had just pushed open one of the glass-panelled doors when the sound of voices arguing fiercely in Spanish came to her. Luis was there, slim and elegant as usual, gesticulating wildly as he tried to impose his will on the receptionist, who was on her feet and facing him across the desk her dark eyes flashing with anger.

The closing of the door caught the receptionist's attention. She glanced across, gasped and flung out an arm to point at Diana. Luis turned. His dark grey eyes widened with shock, and in two strides he was across the hall.

'Madre de Dios ! Is it really you, Diana, alive and well?' he asked in an awed voice.

'Yes, it's me.'

'Where have you been? How did you get here? *Por Dios*, never in the whole of my life did I pass such a night as last night, not even when Rosa was born. I thought you had gone out into the jungle and were lost. I wondered what I was going to tell your father and Jason. Today I feel old, very much my age,' he groaned, and passed a long-fingered hand over his face.

'I'm sorry, *señor*,' she apologised. 'But you see I couldn't stay with you after what Rosa told me.'

'Rosa?' His eyes narrowed warily. 'It was her fault that you left? But I do not understand. She was so hysterical with fear thinking you might be lost in the jungle when she realised you were not in the house. You must tell me what she said to you.' He glanced round at the receptionist, who was now watching them curiously. 'I tried to see

your father. That she-dragon would not let me in—too early, she said.' He lifted his arms and hands expressively. 'Such rules and regulations!' he exclaimed. 'But we cannot talk here. Come out to the car.'

'Only if you promise not to kidnap me,' she said.

'I?' he queried, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise. 'I would not kidnap you for the world, *senora*, not now. You are too much—how shall I say it?—You are too much of a troublemaker. Maybe when I was younger, yes, I might have done. Now I prefer a more peaceable existence. Come to the car.'

'I haven't had my breakfast yet,' Diana said as she followed him down the steps to the car. 'Would you mind if we go to the hotel and talk while I eat? You could have some coffee.' She would feel safer there, she decided, with Gerda's eagle eye watching over everything.

'I can think of better places in which to drink coffee,' he replied with a grimace of distaste, 'but I will come with you and watch you satisfy your appetite.'

At the hotel Gerda seemed very gratified when Senor Sugar himself condescended to sit in the dining room. She served Diana's breakfast herself and hovered about the room until Luis had taken the first sip of the coffee she had put before him. Becoming irritated by her presence, he turned in his seat and snapped,

'*Si, si senora*, the coffee is delicious. Now please go away.'

Her pale eyes gleaming with pleasure at his praise for her coffee, she sidled out of the room, and Luis leaned forward across the table.

'Now, Diana, you will please tell me everything. Why you left the *hacienda* and how you managed to get to Puno.'

She was reluctant to tell him how Rosa had behaved, so she told him only why and how she had hidden in the car and had been driven by the unwitting Jose to the factory. While she was talking he sat watching her, his expressive face registering all sorts of different emotions from surprise through amusement to distress.

'But this is terrible,' he said when she had finished. 'To think you were made to feel so unwelcome in my house that you feared to ask to be brought back to Puno! You must tell me at once what Rosa said to you to make you feel like that so that I can punish her.'

'Oh, no, you mustn't do that. I can't tell you anything if you're going to punish her,' she exclaimed. 'She wasn't very nice to me, but she had reason not to be. She was still upset from the shock you had given her the night before.'

'I can see, Diana, that you have a much stronger will than your delicate appearance suggests,' Luis said with a gleam of admiration. 'But if you do not tell me I shall punish Rosa just the same, and you would dislike that even more, wouldn't you? It would offend your English sense of justice and fair play. Come now, tell me.'

She could see no way of avoiding telling him all Rosa had said to her during the ride through the jungle, which had led to her decision to leave the *hacienda* somehow before his own return. Her cheeks grew slightly warm with embarrassment during the telling, especially when she came to the part about Rosa's belief that he had chosen her to be his next mistress, and she saw his long thin-lipped mouth curl sardonically at one corner.

When she had finished talking he sat in silence for a moment, his eyes hidden, the curl of his mouth very pronounced.

'So,' he murmured at last. 'I see a portrait of myself in this picture you paint. It is not a very flattering one. No, no,' he added quickly,

holding up a hand to silence her when she would have spoken, 'do not apologise. It is good for me to have my ego deflated, good for me to see myself as a young woman like yourself sees me and as my own daughter sees me, although I must give Rosa full marks for subtlety in attempting to use my bad reputation with women to serve her own ends. However, she reckoned without your independent spirit and determination. Also she did not know my real reason for inviting you to the *hacienda*.'

'What was it?' Diana asked.

'To shock her out of her infatuation for Jason by producing the wife he had never told her about. To show her he had deceived her, either intentionally or unwittingly, I'm not sure about that. I hoped to make him seem a little less attractive in her eyes.'

'But I don't understand. You told me yourself how I could help her to marry him,' she exclaimed.

'When did I do that?' he asked with a frown.

'When we were having coffee in the salon. You said that if I divorced Jason he would be free to marry Rosa.'

'Ah, yes, I remember. But you misunderstood me. I was only sounding you out on the question of divorce,' he explained smoothly. 'I was trying to discover how you felt about him. I found that you loved him, but that is all, because for some reason you decided to go to bed. I thought of following you there to persist with the discussion, then I decided there was no hurry. We could continue it the next day when I returned from Puno.'

He paused as if expecting her to make some' comment, but she was so amazed by his smooth explanation she couldn't think of anything to say.

'I made a mistake,' he went on with a sigh and the glimmer of a wry smile. 'I forgot to take into account the jealousy a young woman with a fiery temperament like my Rosa experienced when she found herself faced unexpectedly by the wife of the man with whom she fancied herself in love. Consequently I did not foresee your reaction to that spite.' He gave a low, amused laugh. 'You and Rosa must have spat at each other like two angry cats! I almost wish I could have been hidden near at hand to overhear you. I'm sure your little clash must have been most entertaining.'

Diana could only stare at him, revolted by, the sadism which she detected in his attitude, but his explanation of what he thought had happened was so reasonable that it was possible to believe every word of it., Then why had she imagined he had invited her to the *hacienda* for an ulterior motive? What had given her the impression that he had been interested in seducing her and which had made it easy for her to believe Rosa's remarks about him?

The car ride—that was it; on the way to the *hacienda* when he had touched her hand and had suggested she had been starved of love.

'I see doubt in your eyes,' Luis observed. 'You do not believe my intentions in inviting you to my home were good or honest, do you?'

'I want to believe you,' she replied sincerely, 'but I find it difficult when I remember what you said and the way you behaved on the way to the *hacienda*.'

Again she thought she saw admiration gleam in his narrow eyes. He leaned back in his chair and smiled rather mockingly.

'How careless of me to forget that,' he replied lightly. 'Your wits are sharp, *senora*. It is not as easy to fool you as it is to fool Rosa. So how shall I explain that away? Let me see. You will agree, I'm sure,

that by nature most Ecuadorians are a warm and kindly people, who care very much about the feelings of others?'

'Yes, I do agree,' she replied, thinking of Maria and Sancho.

'We feel intensely.' He placed his bony hand on his heart. 'We have to show our feelings. You are young enough to be my daughter, Diana, and my sister had told me the story of you and Jason. I not only sensed that you were starved of love, I knew you had been very unhappy. I wanted to comfort you. A few soft words, a touch on the hand—what more was needed? Do you believe me?'

She stared at his handsome face. For a moment she could believe that the place of the middle-aged Don Juan had been taken by a concerned and kindly father. But only for a moment.

'If what you say is true and you had no wish to seduce me then you must think I was very silly to run away from the *hacienda*,' she said coolly.

'Not silly, a little over-wrought perhaps with the heat and the isolation in which you found yourself. You are very sensitive and you have been badly hurt, and so naturally you are wary of people.' He smiled brilliantly, charmingly. 'Tell me, was your return to Puno worthwhile? Was Jason here when you arrived?'

'Yes, he was.'

'*Bueno*. I would like to see him again. Is it possible?'

'No. He's gone away again.'

'So soon? How very disconcerting he is! I admit I find his behaviour very casual, a little rough. That is why he would not make a good partner for Rosa. At present she finds his abrupt, rough behaviour

enigmatic and therefore fascinating. He puzzles her, so she is attracted.'

'Do you think your plan to shock her out of her infatuation has worked?'

'It is too soon to say. Only when Arturo returns and she meets him again shall I know. Meanwhile I am glad there is no possibility of her meeting Jason again. You will take care of that for me, won't you?'

'Will I? How?' asked Diana, opening her eyes wide.

Luis's long mouth curled satirically as he stood up.

'Oh, I think you will do that just by being yourself, your sweetly innocent, slightly confused self.' He smiled down at her and then, lifting her hand from the table where it rested, he raised it to his lips and kissed it. 'I regret I shall not have the pleasure of your company at the *hacienda* after all. It would have been interesting to have advanced a little your education in the ways of love. And now I must say *Adios*. Before I leave is there anything you would like me to do for you or your father?'

'I left my suitcase at the *hacienda*. Could you return it to me, please?'

'Assuredly. Jose will bring it. He is going to be a little disconcerted when I tell him how you deceived him yesterday. You see, not only is he my chauffeur, but he is also my bodyguard. If he had been doing his job properly he would have searched the car before leaving the *hacienda* to make sure no one was hiding in it.'

'Oh, I do hope you're not going to punish him for not doing his work properly,' she said, dismayed to find that her escapade had developed ramifications she could never have foreseen.

'I might. It depends on whether I can think up a punishment suitable to deal with his lack of concern for my personal safety,' he said coldly. '*Adios*, Diana.'

'*Adios, señor*,' she replied faintly, and was glad to see him go.'

Even now she wasn't sure whether Luis had been telling her the truth when he had said his real reason for inviting her to the *hacienda* had been to shock Rosa out of her infatuation for Jason. Yet she could imagine he was cruel enough to act in such a way and that he found pleasure in manipulating people. She could believe quite easily too that, having arranged a marriage for Rosa which served his own ends, he had been angry when the girl had defied him by inconveniently falling in love with someone other than her chosen husband, someone rough and abrupt and totally unsuitable and he had done his utmost to prevent her from seeing Jason again.

Once more she compared Luis with her own father, who hadn't stood in her way when she had wanted to marry Jason even though he had had reservations about the timing and who, in his own quiet way, was trying to help her save her marriage now.'

She went back to the hospital and was pleased to find Chris out of bed and pacing about his room in a slow methodical way which she recognised. He was thinking and planning—a good sign. When he saw her he looked both surprised and pleased as he came forward to kiss her on the cheek.

'Good lord,' he exclaimed mildly. 'I wasn't expecting you until tomorrow.'

'I ... I came back yesterday,' she said, feeling a little reluctant to tell him about her escapade, knowing what a stickler he was for good behaviour. He might think she had insulted Luis Guillermo by

leaving his house in such an underhand way. 'It's nice to see you walking about. Are you feeling much better?'

'Yes, well enough, in fact, to be on the move,' he replied with a smile. 'Doc Willis says as far as he's concerned I can leave any day I wish as long as I report to a doctor in Quito while I'm there and then again to my own doctor when I get back to London.' He sat down on the side of the bed and pointed to the chair which Diana slid into obediently. 'I could have arranged to go tomorrow, only I didn't think you'd be back. What happened? Didn't you like the *hacienda*?'

His eyes were very bright and shrewd. He might have had a bash on the head, but the resultant rest had done him good and now he was as sharp as ever.

'No, not very much,' she mumbled. 'And I wanted to see Jason.'

'Did you?'

'Yes.'

'Mmm. He was here for a while yesterday afternoon. He said he'd arrange for a plane to pick me up day after tomorrow. Jolly good of him to go to all the trouble.' He gave her another sharp glance. 'He seemed a little put out because you'd gone with Guillermo—said the man has a reputation for being a woman-chaser. Is that why you left?'

'It was one of the reasons,' she said steadily.

'I see. And you've seen Jason and were able to talk things over again? Did you find out if there is another woman?'

'Yes, I did. I... I offered to divorce him if he wants to marry her.'

'And what did he say to that?'

'He said I was very generous and ...' She broke off, because she remembered what had happened after that.

'And what?' prompted her father rather impatiently. 'Did he agree to a divorce?'

'I don't know. He didn't say and now he's gone away again and I've no idea where or why. Daddy, do you know?'

'I assume he's gone to Quito. He told me he had to make a report to the company's head office on the discovery which was made yesterday. It's a very busy time for him just now, so you'll have to let him off if he's a little absent-minded. So you're no further forward on the question of divorce?'

'No.'

'Who is the woman? Do you know?'

'I... I think it's Rosa Guillermo,' she confessed.

'Oho, so that's one of your reasons for leaving the *hacienda*, is it?' he remarked shrewdly. 'But you say you *think*. Don't you know?'

'I know there's someone and I know Rosa is in love with him, because her father told me she was.'

'But that doesn't mean Jason returns the compliment and loves her.'

'Oh, I know it doesn't, but I can't think of anyone else, and I know there is someone, because Jason said he's spent the last few months trying to forget her.'

'But he mentioned no names,' said Chris Farley slowly, pulling his lower lip between thumb and forefinger and narrowing his eyes speculatively as he studied her rather wan face.

Diana thought about the question, her mind flitting back over all that she and Jason had said to each other the night before. The only time he had mentioned Rosa, she realised, was when she had taunted him about the woman, and then he had mentioned her in conjunction with Carol because there was a similarity between them; a similarity, she realised with a little jolt of understanding, which existed only in *her* mind. Both of them were the other woman of her imagination. He had proved her wrong about Carol. Had he been suggesting that she was wrong about Rosa too?

'No, he didn't,' she admitted.

'Then you really don't know, do you? It's all guesswork on your part.' He sighed with a touch of weariness. 'You don't seem to have got very far in your discussions with him.'

'Well, Jason is so non-committal. He doesn't like talking about himself,' she defended.

'Mmm, so I've noticed,' he remarked dryly. 'Has it ever occurred to you, my dear, that the someone he has spent the last few months trying to forget is yourself?'

'*Me?*' was all Diana could say in an incredulous voice.

'Yes, you, his wife, the girl he married in such a hurry and who hurt him very badly twice over ...'

'I didn't mean to hurt him,' she burst out, suddenly very near to tears. 'I didn't know he could be hurt in that way.'

'Oh, I admit he does a very good cover-up job, pride and all that. But you know, Diana, it's always possible to hurt the one you love and who loves you.'

'Jason loves me?' she mumbled, her eyes wide and fawnlike.

'I think it would be more correct to say that he *loved* you once. How he feels about you now is a different matter, but I hope you can get your business with him sorted out before you and I fly back to England four days from now,' her father replied coolly. 'It would be very convenient if you could.'

'But I don't know if I'll see him again,' she exclaimed. 'If he'd wanted to see me again he wouldn't have gone away without telling me or he'd have left a note,' she added disconsolately.

'That doesn't necessarily follow,' argued her father in his mild yet decisive way. 'Maybe he didn't have time to write it. Maybe he didn't have a pencil or paper. There are all sorts of simple reasons, my dear, and if you're always going to imagine bigger more complicated reasons for why he left without letting you know you're never going to be happy with a man like Jason. I've told you he's very busy just now, and if you love him you'll just have to accept him the way he is and trust him to get in touch with you. He knows you'll be in Quito the day after tomorrow. He knows we're leaving the day after that. That's all the advice and comfort I can offer you. The rest is up to you and him.'

It was good calm advice, Diana knew, even if the comfort offered seemed a little cold. She spent another fifteen minutes with him and then walked back to the hotel to get some of his clothing so that he could leave the hospital the next day.

Waiting and seeing had never been her speciality, she thought ruefully, wondering how she was going to fill the time until they left for Quito, knowing that her thoughts would be revolving perpetually around Jason, reviewing all he had said to her last night in the light of what her father had suggested today.

But to her surprise, when she arrived back at the hotel, Gerda told her that Ted Turner, the missionary-doctor, had phoned to say that

instead of flying herself and her father to Quito the day after tomorrow he could pick them up the next morning if they could be at the landing strip by nine o'clock. Pleased with this turn of events, Diana collected her father's clothing and went back to the hospital to tell him the news.

'That will be Jason's doing,' he remarked. 'Knowing you were back from the *hacienda* he guessed I wouldn't want to linger here. Now all we have to do is arrange for someone to take us to the landing strip.'

But even that had been arranged for them, because in the evening when she and her father were eating an evening meal at the hotel Tex Gordon, the driller who had sat in front of the station wagon with her the day she had arrived in Puno, walked into the dining room and told them it would give him great pleasure to drive them in the morning.

Gerda was surprisingly tearful as she said goodbye the next day. The little town seemed to be crying too, for there had been another storm in the night and everything was wet and dripping. Grey steam rose from the long green grass beside the landing strip as the sun broke through the clouds and its hot rays caused the rainwater to evaporate.

Steam-heat, green mould, the creaking of wicker furniture, the all-pervading smell of chlorine and the continual croaking of frogs were some of the memories she would have of Puno, gateway to the jungle, thought Diana, as the plane took off. There would be other memories too; of Gerda's stern kindness, of the bright enthusiasm of the hospital staff, of the rowdyism of the oil roustabouts and above all of Jason, her bitter-sweet lover of one night.

Soon she was looking down at the bright shimmer of the Rio Napo, which looked like an oil slick on a sea of green as it meandered through the trackless jungle reflecting the silvery storm cloud which hovered over it. The plane zoomed upwards between the tree-clad walls of the mountains, higher and higher until black spots danced

before her eyes and she knew that the altitude was making the air thin so that in the unpressurised cabin of the little plane breathing became difficult for a few moments before it began its descent to the airport.

The landing was perfect and her father seemed none the worse for the flight. Ted Turner accompanied them to the airport building .carrying the suitcase for her. As they approached the building Diana found anticipation growing within her, causing her heart to beat faster.

Maybe Jason would be inside the building waiting to welcome them. If he was she would know everything was all right between them that there would be no divorce because he still loved her.

It was a quiet time of the day and there were few people in the arrival lounge. The quietness was disturbed by a sudden flurry of movement. Her bright smile flashing, her ear-rings glinting, Maria Suarez appeared before them and behind her Sancho added his warm smile of welcome.

And smiling back bravely, Diana hid her disappointment, although inwardly she felt part of her had died because Jason had not come to meet her after all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IN the distance the city glittered in the sunshine against the background of green mountains and the peak of Cotopaxi shone like a cone of crystal against the blue sky. The car in which Diana was travelling approached Quito inexorably along the road which swept down from the north; as inexorably as her last day in Ecuador was approaching its end, she thought dully, for tomorrow, unless something out of the ordinary happened, and she must always remember it could happen in this enchanted land, she and her father would leave and fly home to England.

She sighed, not knowing that she did, and drew the attention of Maria Suarez who was sitting beside her in the back of the car they had hired to take them to the town of Otavalo, over a hundred kilometres to the north of Quito.

'You are tired, *querida*?' the kindly woman asked. 'It is not surprising. We were up before the dawn, you and I, to go to the market. But it was worth the effort, was it not? For me Otavalo market is the most exciting and colourful in the country.'

'Oh, I agree.' Diana tried to force enthusiasm into her voice because she had really been fascinated by the Indian market, but since her arrival in Quito the day before she had felt very lethargic. She realised her lack of energy and limpness could be due to the violent change of altitude which had taken place when she had flown from Puno when she had exchanged the steam-heat of the gateway to the Oriente jungle for the crisp springlike atmosphere of the Andean highlands.

Yet, deep down, she knew there was more to her lethargy because the feeling of being half-dead was not new to her. It was associated with being separated from Jason. Only this time it was worse—an anguish which showed no signs of growing less and had been intensified by

the fact that he had not been at Quito airport to meet her nor had he made any attempt to get in touch with her.

She was sure she would not see him again, and that feeling was being aggravated by what seemed to be a conspiracy of silence about Jason on the part of Maria, Sancho and even her father, none of whom had mentioned him. Ramon, who might have said something, if only to taunt her, was away on holiday with some student friends, climbing in the mountains.

It was not that she didn't want to ask Maria if she had seen Jason. It was just that she lacked the courage to ask in case she might hear something about him which would hurt her again. And she didn't want to be hurt any more.

The trip to Otavalo with Maria, while her father visited a doctor and attended to some business matters, had offered a diversion she had been glad to accept. The road north had passed through some breathtaking mountain scenery to the little highland town with its steep cobbled streets and big square dominated over by the usual church and government building.

'I liked the colour and the movement,' Diana said now, in her effort to show Maria she had been interested. 'The white culottes, the bright ponchos and the black pigtales of the Indian men. And the women were really beautiful and graceful even when they were sitting with their bare feet in the gutter.'

'*Si*, they belong to an old pre-Inca tribe. They own their land and their houses and they work the ground with wooden ploughs, raise animals, weave cloth and make pottery. They are a highly skilled and superior people. You are pleased with your purchases? The roll of fine tweed, the leather wallets and the hat?'

'Oh, yes—especially the hat.' It was made from yellow felt and had a wide brim which stood up away from the face and neck, completely concealing the crown, and it had seemed to her that every Indian had worn one, each one a different colour to contrast or match the equally bright ponchos.

'*Bueno*, I am glad. I would have preferred our lunch to have been a little better than it was,' said Maria. 'But the hotel was busy with many tourists. It is in such a pretty situation on the shores of the lake.'

'Yes, it is, with the view of the volcano. What did you say its name is? The one which was the colour of ground coffee and had a coronet of little white clouds round its summit?

'Tunguragua.'

'I must write it down in my diary when I get back,' said Diana, looking out of the window again as the car entered the city. 'Otavalo was very different from Puno. You wouldn't think they were in the same country.'

'Ah, that is Ecuador, a small country which contains most of the earth's climates from polar cold to the steaming heat of the jungle. Did you enjoy your visit to the old *hacienda* where I was born and where my brother Luis still lives?'

'Yes.' Best to be non-committal about that, thought Diana, because she wasn't sure how much Maria knew about Rosa's infatuation for Jason.

'And how did you like Rosa? She is attractive, is she not? And soon to be married to Arturo Gomez whose father owns banana plantations near Guayaquil. It will be one of the big social events of the year.'

'I hope she will be very happy.' Diana's throat seemed to have closed up as tears threatened when she had a sudden memory of her own wedding day and Jason arriving, his arms full of daffodils, then taking her hand to lead her to the register office.

'I'm sure she will be,' said Maria. 'There was a time that she fancied herself in love with Jason. It was so silly of her. He behaved very properly and went away back to his work when he realised what was happening.' Maria made a sound which was half a sigh and half a laugh. 'When you are young like Rosa these things pass. She will forget Jason once she sees Arturo again. You need have no fear about that.'

Diana flashed a startled glance at her plump companion. It sounded very much as if Maria had been in communication with her brother recently. But the car was slowing down outside a house in a narrow cobbled street. Maria turned to her with a smile.

'I thought you might like to meet a friend of mine ... Carlotta del Ponte,' she said smoothly. 'Unfortunately she was made a widow a few months ago. She had two little children. You do not object?'

'No, no, of course not.' Visiting was better than returning to the Suarez house to sit wondering where Jason was and why he had not tried to get in touch with her.

The house was like a miniature reproduction of the one in which Maria lived. High white walls had narrow windows in them protected by elegant wrought iron balconies. There was a central courtyard where palms and orange trees gave shade. Inside the heavy wooden main door there was a small hallway with a red-tiled floor, white walls and a dark beamed ceiling.

Carlotta del Ponte was a slim, sad-eyed woman of about thirty. Her face was perfectly oval, her skin was olive-tinted. She wore her

shining dark brown hair braided around her small head and was dressed simply in a short-sleeved black dress. She greeted Diana pleasantly and introduced her two little girls, Rita and Regina.

In the salon Diana sat with Maria on a huge modern davenport covered in gold velvet and drank tea from pretty china decorated with daisies. They talked about Otavalo, Puno, Rosa's forthcoming wedding and England. Carlotta did not speak much English, so Maria had to do much translating back and forth, which she did with much enjoyment and laughter.

After tea they went out into the garden which was surrounded by high walls in one of which there was a wrought iron gate leading to a narrow street at the back of the house.

It was a lovely natural garden full of birdsong. Forget-me-nots, daisies and marigolds bloomed there riotously. Bushes crowded together to make hiding places for the little girls and there was a small arbor where blossom rained down on a white-painted wrought iron table and some chairs.

Diana wished she could have stayed in the garden for ever, but Maria was insistent that she should see the rest of the house.

'I shall take you round because Carlotta does not have enough English to explain everything to you,' said Maria, linking her arm through Diana's. 'You are not too tired, *querida*?' she whispered concernedly as she guided her towards the house. 'You look very pale. You suffer a little perhaps from mountain sickness?'

'Perhaps,' conceded Diana. 'But I would like to see the rest of the house.'

On the ground floor of the house they went from the salon through an archway into a small dining room furnished with a refectory table

and big high-backed brass-studded leather-covered chairs and from there into the kitchen, which was fairly well equipped according to Ecuadorian standards.

From the small hallway they went up the spiralling staircase with the black wrought iron railings to the bedrooms, of which there were four.

'You will see that this room is smaller because part of it was taken off to make a bathroom,' explained Maria. 'But it has good cupboards like the rest, for storing clothing and linen, and it also has a window which opens out on to the outside gallery above the courtyard.'

She opened the window to demonstrate and Diana hovered near it to look down through intricately wrought railings into the shadow-patched sunlit square of the yard.

'Poor Carlotta, she is so sad since her husband died,' sighed Maria.

'What happened to him?' asked Diana.

'He was killed in an earthquake.'

'Earthquake?' Diana exclaimed.

'Si. We have them, you know. Sometimes bad, sometimes not so bad. This was a tremor further south. Emilio was a government official. He had gone to survey the damage done. There was another bad tremor and the building in which he was inspecting collapsed completely. It was very sad.'

Diana moved closer to the window, aware of movement in the courtyard below. She saw the shadow of the man before he appeared. Then his head came into view—blond-streaked shaggy hair, broad shoulders under a blue shirt, long legs moving in a lazy graceful stride. As he made towards the door in the corner of the yard opposite

the two little girls ran out to greet him. Bending, he scooped each one of them up in an arm and carried them into the house.

It couldn't be Jason, not here, not being greeted by those two children and carrying them into the house as if they were his own. Diana's fingers curled tightly around the iron railing of the gallery on to which she had stepped in order to see better as in her mind she heard the echo of his voice telling her about the crazy dream he had had about having a house, of staying put in one place, of raising a couple of children. Surely the home wasn't here, in this house, with Carlotta of the sad face and her two little girls?

'Diana, you are not well.' Maria's voice was concerned again. 'Ah, I should have been more considerate. It has been too much for you today—the change from the lowlands to the highlands. It is bad for us Ecuadorians, but it is even worse for you who are a stranger here. They say this change of altitude is why we are a slightly mad people. Did you know that? Come, let us go downstairs. You can lie on the sofa in the salon until you feel well again.'

'I'm all right, really I am,' said Diana. 'It's a very pretty house. Thank you for showing me around. Is ... is Carlotta going to marry again?'

'No, no, not yet. It is too soon after her husband's death. She is still in mourning for him and cannot think of marrying again until she is out of mourning.'

As she followed Maria down the winding stairway Diana could hear the little girls chattering excitedly. Their voices were coming from the salon. A deeper masculine voice answered them and its familiar drawling sound made Diana's heart leap and begin to thud furiously. There were shrieks of laughter from the girls, followed by the sound of Carlotta's voice, not as sad and weary as it had been, but warm with laughter too.

'It sounds as if Jason has come,' said Maria gaily.

'You knew he was coming here?' exclaimed Diana, and Maria paused on the last stair to turn and look back at her.

'He said he would try to make it,' she said. 'You did not know?'

'No,' replied Diana tautly. 'Oh, he never tells me anything.'

Maria smiled indulgently and shrugged her plump shoulders.

'Sometimes the men, they like to give us a little surprise. It is a sign of love,' she said consolingly, and stepped down on to the floor.

As she followed Maria across the hall Diana felt breathless and her heart felt as if it might burst at any minute. In the salon Jason was sitting cross-legged on the floor and the little girls were crouched beside him, obviously demonstrating to him some mechanical toy. Carlotta was sitting nearby on a big golden pouffe, but when she heard the click of heels on the wooden floor she stood up and came towards Maria, smiling and saying something in Spanish.

Jason looked up. Across the expanse of rug-scattered shining parquet Diana glared at him, saw his eyes crinkle at the corners as he smiled at her. With a lithe twist he stood up and came towards her. She had the impression that he was going to kiss her, so she stepped back a pace. At once the smile left his eyes and they became shadowed and wary.

'Hi,' he drawled. 'What do you think of the house?'

A little surprised by the question, conscious of Maria and Carlotta watching her, of the little girls sidling up to their mother, their eyes round and dark in their golden-skinned faces as they gazed solemnly up at herself and Jason, Diana struggled to keep calm and answer coolly.

'It's very nice. What are you doing here?'

'I thought it would be a good place to meet and settle everything,' he replied. His eyebrows came together in a frown. A look of concern darkened his eyes even more. 'You don't look too good,' he added softly, and his hand curled round her arm to urge her towards the big sofa. 'Why don't you sit down? I guess you've been overdoing things today.'

Diana was hazily aware of sinking down on to the sofa and of Jason lifting her feet up and pushing her back against some cushions. She wanted to protest, to tell him she was perfectly all right, but he turned away and passed out of her sight. She closed her eyes and a red-spotted blackness swirled before them so she opened them quickly in time to see the room swirling round her too. She could hear a voice speaking in soft lilting Spanish, then everything was quiet and all she could hear were the birds singing in the garden and the dull rumble of traffic passing down a cobbled street.

After a while the breathlessness and the terrible thumping of her heart subsided and she began to wonder if she had imagined that Jason had been there. Fear that it might have been her imagination playing tricks made her sit up and swing her feet to the floor. She was just about to stand up when Jason appeared in the archway. He was carrying a cup and saucer. He came across the room, hooked a foot under a small round occasional table and pulled it near the sofa. He put the cup and saucer down on it, then sat down beside her.

'Maria says you should drink this and then you will feel better,' he said.

'What is it?'

'Some sort of tea which has a tranquillising effect. She says you have mountain sickness.'

Diana picked up the cup and sipped the weak insipid drink. When she had finished most of it she looked round, fully expecting Maria and Carlotta to appear. But no one came. The house was very quiet, no sound of children at all.

'Okay now?' Jason touched her hands which were lying laxly in her lap. She moved them and immediately he withdrew his hand.

'Yes, thank you,' she said stiltedly. 'Jason, where have you been? What have you been doing?' They were the questions she had always asked, the questions he didn't like.

'The day I left Puno I came here. Yesterday I had to go to Guayaquil. I arrived back from there about an hour ago, called in to the office to see Gary, then came on here,' he explained with unusual patience, and leaned against the back of the sofa, spreading his arms along the top of it. He lifted his feet to the occasional table and Diana glanced round quickly, half fearing Carlotta might come in and object to the desecration of the elegant piece of furniture.

'I'm feeling a bit bushed myself,' he went on. 'But the rush is over now and from today on I'm on holiday for three weeks—three whole weeks.' He laughed, flinging back his head in joyous abandon. 'I can hardly believe it,' he added.

'Why didn't you tell me you were coming to Quito?' she queried, a little envious of his joy because so far she hadn't been able to share in it.

'To tell you the truth I forgot to tell you when I was with you.' He paused, then said with a wicked inflection, 'We were busy doing other things, if you care to remember. And in the morning you were sleeping so peacefully I hadn't the heart to wake you. As it was I overslept and nearly missed the plane.'

'You could have left a note or a message with Gerda explaining where you had gone,' she said.

Jason was silent and still for a few moments. When he spoke his voice had lost its lazy good humour, was menacingly taut.'

'Are you holding it against me because I didn't?'

She fiddled nervously with the ring on her finger, knowing that they had reached an explosive point.

'.I can't help it,' she mumbled. 'Oh, Jason, if you only knew what it does to me every time you go away like that without a word, as if ... as if ... what had happened between us didn't mean anything to you. I seem to die a little inside.'

'Well, what the hell do you think happens to me when I have to leave you?' he countered on a note of suppressed violence.

'But it's different for men ...'

'Different? In what way is it different? Do you think a man has no feelings? Do you think it doesn't hurt me to say goodbye too?'

So he had intended it to be goodbye when he had left without waking her the other morning, and he hadn't wanted to say goodbye to her face in case she had clung to him and had asked him to stay.

Then why was he here now putting her through more agony? Hadn't he punished her enough? Had he a streak of sadism she hadn't known about and had he been unable to let her go without gloating, without arranging for her to see this house where undoubtedly he was welcome and at home?

She stood up and looked about wildly for her handbag, unable to remember where she had left it. She must find Maria and leave, escape before she broke down.

'Where are you going?' he demanded, and she made the mistake, of looking down at him. A light blue shirt had always made his eyes look bluer and now it set off the golden tan of his skin. Only half buttoned, its sleeves carelessly rolled back from the wrists for coolness in the heat of the day, it seemed to emphasize the brawniness of his forearms and the breadth of his chest, and she found herself wondering miserably why it was that clothing carelessly worn by him always aroused this desire in her to touch and caress him.

'To find Maria,' she said dully, her glance flicking away from him to the archway.

'She's gone.'

'Oh. Then how can I get to her house from here?'

'I'll take you, if you really want to go.'

'Well, I can't stay here in this house, not now.'

'Why not? I thought you liked it. And what the hell do you mean by not now?' he asked.

'I do like it. It's very pretty. But I can't stay because it belongs to that woman.'

'Which woman?'

'Senora del Ponte.'

'No, it doesn't. It belongs to me. I bought it the day before yesterday.'

'You've bought it?' Diana mouthed slowly in repetition as she stared at him in amazement.

He returned her stare with a slightly mocking one.

'That's what I said. I had to act pretty fast too, because there were a couple of other people after it. It comes complete with furniture.' He sounded very pleased with himself as if he had pulled off a clever business deal.

'And does it come complete with that woman and her two children? Are those the ones you're going to raise?' she flung at him.

She wasn't quite sure what happened next. Her wrist was grasped painfully and when she tried to break away from him his fingers tightened cruelly. She had a glimpse of his eyes blazing at her from a face which was the colour of ashes, then she was over his knees, winded by the shock of landing there face downwards, feeling the hardness of his thighs pressing into her breasts, seeing the pattern of roses on the woollen scatter rug which was on the floor beside the sofa.

As she realised what he was going to do she wriggled and tried to roll off on to the floor. But Jason put an arm over her and tightened it, making movement impossible. Next she kicked her legs up backwards to prevent him from striking her bottom, but with the edge of his other hand he gave her a sharp blow on both calves so that her legs sagged again, downwards.

'I told you once I don't go in for hitting' women,' he seethed, 'but this time you gone too far with your accusations and hints! A good spanking is the only way left to deal with you.'

'No, Jason, please don't spank me. I'm sorry...'

'And you're going to be sorrier when I've finished with you,' he growled, and hit her buttocks a sharp resounding blow with the flat of his hand. Twice more he slapped her, stinging blows which made her want to cry out. But she didn't. She screwed up her eyes tightly so that tears wouldn't fall and gritted her teeth so that no sound would escape from her.

When he had finished she felt his arm relax and she rolled off on to the floor to collapse in a heap. She was aware that Jason stood up and walked away from her. Afraid that he might walk out on her, she struggled to her feet and smoothed back her hair. To her relief he was standing by the small sideboard from which he had taken a bottle and a glass and was pouring a drink for himself.

Nothing quite so catastrophic had ever happened to her in the whole of her life as the spanking he had just given her, she thought, and it could mean the end of the tempestuous love-hate affair which had been their marriage to date.

She discovered that her hands were trembling, so she put them behind her back, gripping them together tightly. Her skin was stinging where it had been slapped and she was sure it must bear the marks of Jason's hands. But her pride was in the dust and the impulse to fling out of the house and leave him without another word died almost as soon as it grew inside her, for she knew that she had deserved to be spanked. She had driven him to the end of his endurance and he had shown her exactly how he felt about her accusations. Never again would she taunt him about Rosa or Carlotta or any other woman. She had learned her lesson.

But it seemed to her that the broad blue back was set in a straight unforgiving way, and she wondered desperately how she was going to convince him that she regretted what she had said, that her taunt had been the result of painful jealousy which once again had

overcome her so that she had lashed out at him, the person she loved most in all the world.

'I... I'm truly sorry, Jason,' she began.

'Easy words. You've used them before,' he retorted roughly.

'I wouldn't have said what I did, only I love you so much and I ...' she mumbled.

'You have some damned funny ways of showing you do,' he interrupted her harshly, setting down the glassful of liquor and swinging round to face her. 'Only the other night you suggested that Rosa Guillermo was the woman who would be the mother of my kids. Today you've implied that when I bought this house I took over Carlotta del Ponte and her two girls.' He took a long shuddering breath, the sound of which went through her like a stabbing sword, and pushed the fronds of hair back from his forehead with a big hand. 'What sort of man do you think I am? A woman-chaser like Luis Guillermo?' he grated.

'Well, what was I supposed to think when you left me in Puno without telling me where you were going or whether I would see you again after I'd offered to divorce you so you could marry another woman?' she defended weakly, sliding a step forward to be nearer to him.

Jason folded his arms across his chest as he leaned against the sideboard and looked down at her from under frowning eyebrows.

'You were supposed to trust me. You were supposed to understand that I would see you again fairly soon,' he muttered.

'But how could I when you hadn't given me any reason to believe I'd see you again?'

'Not given you any reason to?' he exclaimed, his eyes blazing again. '*God in heaven*, woman, do you really think I could have made love to you the other night the way I did if I hadn't believed there was a chance of us living together again?' He gave her a narrowed guarded glance. 'Now you're not going to tell me that what we did that night in Puno meant nothing to you and expect me to believe it,' he added softly.

'No, I'm not,' she replied, feeling a little thrill of excitement leap along her nerves. 'But I still don't understand. You asked me what I would do if you said yes, that was what you wanted—a divorce so you could marry Rosa.'

'And you didn't listen to me properly,' he accused. 'The important word was *if*. *If I asked you*. I wasn't asking you then, I was testing you to find out how you felt. You'd dodged the issue when I'd asked you if you wanted to divorce me so you could marry Paul. You'd been dodging that issue all along. But your answer to my questions wasn't the one I wanted to hear and I was pretty sure it wasn't the one you wanted to give. Why did you say you'd give me a divorce, anyway?'

'Because... because I love you,' she muttered. 'Because I thought it was what you wanted and I wanted to please you.'

'Of all the illogical, cock-eyed ideas!' he exclaimed vehemently. 'It's a good thing I didn't take you at your word. It's a good thing I decided to try a more direct method to find out how you felt.' He paused and tender amusement glinted in his eyes, giving her hope. 'I thought I'd be able to tell by the way you responded to me how you felt.'

'Oh, that wasn't fair,' she accused, colour storming into her cheeks as she recalled the abandon with which she had responded to him.

'Wasn't it? Whoever said we had to play fair when making love? No one that I ever heard of,' he scoffed. 'It seemed a lot fairer than giving explanations which you didn't or couldn't believe or than listening to you accuse me of things I hadn't done and hadn't thought of doing. I made love to you because I love you and I thought it would show you, once and for all, that I want you to be the mother of those two kids we keep talking about, not Rosa or any other woman, but you ... Now what's the matter?'

Diana had started to weep, not noisily, not with heartrending sobs but quietly, just standing there smiling while the tears dripped down her cheeks.

'You've never said that before,' she said in a low shaky voice.

'Said what?' he demanded with a puzzled frown.

'That you love me.'

Surprise widened his eyes and brought him away from the sideboard to stand right before her. With a gentle finger he stroked one of her cheeks upwards to catch the teardrops.

'I guess I haven't said it because it's too easy to say, like I'm sorry. Too many people have said it and not meant it,' he explained quietly. 'But I've shown you often enough that I love you. Haven't you realised that?'

Joy was like a flower bud which feeling the warmth of the summer sun at last slowly unfurls its petals, and with it desire was awakening within her, a warm familiar tingling sensation.

'No, I haven't,' she said. 'Please tell me how you have.'

'I married you,' he replied softly, and his breath stirred the tendrils of hair which curled damply on her forehead, and although he had made

no effort to touch her she could feel the warmth of his desire reaching out to her, hear the quickened beating of his heart. 'I came back to you during those first nine months whenever I could come. For a person like me, who's always been free of emotional involvement with a woman, that was a hell of a lot of commitment to make. It meant I loved you.' He sighed, and again the slight soft sound cut her to the quick. 'As I said that day to Aunt Gert, love makes fools of us all some time in our lives, and I came a cropper over you.'

There it was again, that touch of bitterness and disillusionment which she had noticed as soon as she had met him again in the hotel bar and which had not been present in the man she had married. Understanding why it was there at last came as a new pain to her. Empathy tore her apart as she realised she was to blame for his disillusionment.

'I was beginning to understand,' she muttered miserably. 'Then Eunice began saying things about you. She ... she said you were a calculating exploiter of women ...'

'Ha!' The crack of laughter was satirical. 'And all because I kissed her goodnight once and didn't invite her out again. But you believed her.'

'I tried not to, but I knew so little about you and what I did know was all physical. Oh, Jason, please try to understand ... I began to think you'd married me ...' She paused to control her voice which had begun to shake, then continued more steadily because she was determined to make everything clear. 'It was suggested to me that you'd married me because that was the only way in which you could get what you wanted from me.'

Jason was silent. He turned away from her and went to sit on the sofa, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.

'I suppose it could have looked like that, considering the way I rushed you,' he admitted. 'I had so little time for wooing you and I was afraid I might lose you to that smooth operator Paul Vinton. I hoped ... no, that's the wrong word... I actually believed that once my ring was on your finger and I'd promised before witnesses to love you, you were mine until death parted us, and I fully intended to be yours until that time.'

'Oh, if only you hadn't gone away to Houston that day, we could have talked about it then,' she cried out.

'Maybe we could,' he agreed heavily. 'But maybe you were still too much under the influence of Eunice. Anyway, I had to go or lose the chance of coming to Ecuador, something I'd always wanted to do. I hoped that after a while, when we'd both simmered down, we'd be able to get together again. I think I realised that part of the trouble was we hadn't had enough time together, so as soon as I knew I'd be here for a while I began to look for a house. When I'd found one I was going to write to you and ask you to come and live here so I could come and live with you when I was able to get away from the jungle. Oh, I had it all planned.' He took a sharp breath and for a moment his hands hid his face. 'But you know what killed that crazy dream. I've told you, and I don't want to talk about it any more.'

There was something dejected about the slump of his shoulders which suggested that he still felt the pain which was the cause of his bitterness; as if it were a wound festering inside him. Somehow she must cauterise that wound so that it would heal cleanly without leaving a scar.

'You didn't tell me you were looking for a house for me when I asked you about it in Puno,' she said, crossing the room and sitting down beside him.

'That was because it was something I'd tried to forget, just as I tried to forget you,' he replied wearily. 'Maybe if I hadn't been so weak after the accident I wouldn't have reacted in the way I did to your letter, but it came at a bad time and it hurt like hell to learn that you still distrusted me. It made me think that the girl I'd married had been an illusion, so I set out to forget you. That's why I didn't tell Maria or Rosa about you. I couldn't bring myself to talk about you to anyone.'

'It was my fault,' she said humbly. 'I should have known that letter was wrong when I found it so hard to write. But I didn't know where you were and I was worried. If I'd known where you were I wouldn't have waited for you to write and ask me. I'd have come because I wanted to be with you. Oh, Jason, I've missed you so much!' Her voice broke and faltered to a stop. She leaned her forehead against his arm and her tears wet the sleeve of his shirt.

He moved his arm to put it round her. She felt his hand at her waist, the long fingers spreading upwards under the curve of her breast as he leaned back, taking her with him so that her head lay against his chest just above the place where his heart beat.

'It's over now, the bad part,' he murmured comfortingly. 'And you're here. We're together again. I was doing a very bad job of forgetting you when Chris turned up at Puno, told me you were at Quito and then insisted I went to tell you about the crash in which he'd been hurt. As soon as I saw you it started all over again.'

'What did?'

'Falling in love with you,' he said softly, and his mouth moved against her hair where it curved over her temple.

'I wouldn't have guessed it,' she teased. 'You were horrid to me.'

'That was my self-defence reflexes going into action. I was afraid of falling in love with you again and finding you were still an illusion. You see, Diana, when I first met you I believed you were all I'd ever looked for in a woman; lovely to look at, cool and poised on the outside, warm and loving inside.'

'And I turned out to be different from what you believed?' she said in a small voice, humbled by his admission.

'No, better than I'd expected,' he replied, giving her a little hug. 'Then you seemed to change. You started saying nasty things to me—I couldn't understand why. They made me pretty miserable. Why did you say them? Why do you still say them?'

Diana fiddled with the third button of his shirt and unfastened it, then slipped her hand under the edge of the opening. Her fingers curled in delight at the feel of his hair roughened skin.

'It's jealousy,' she admitted. 'It's a green fire which burns me up and I strike out at you because the thought of you with another woman hurts me so much.'

'Something like the way I felt when I found you'd gone with Luis Guillermo. It's a good thing he and I didn't meet again. I might have damaged his handsome face for him,' he growled.

'But there was no need for you to be jealous of him,' she protested, raising her head to look at him. 'He's old enough to be my father and it was silly of you to imagine I'd gone with him because I liked him and wanted to live with him. Ugh, I can't bear the thought of him touching me!'

'No more silly than it was of you to imagine I had a mistress in Paris just because I'd been there and hadn't told you I had,' Jason retorted with a grunt of laughter. 'And if Luis Guillermo wasn't to your taste

you have to admit you lapped up all the attention Maria's boy Ramon was giving you that day we visited the Suarez house. He was making eyes at you, whispering in your ear, kissing your hand ...'

'I wasn't lapping it up,' she protested again. 'Oh, he was too young to interest me, and how could I ever want anyone like him or like Luis when you are around?' she added, laying her head against him again and feeling a delicious tingle go down her spine as his hand moved under the hair at the nape of her neck.

'And how could I want anyone like Rosa or Carlotta del Ponte when I'm married to you, you jealous little cat?' he mocked.

'Does it disgust you to find I'm so jealous?' she asked diffidently, still a little afraid that she might forfeit his love for her by the fierce possessiveness of her love for him.

'No, not now, because I know why you are. In fact I think I'm glad you are. It makes you more human, brings you down to my level. I guess I put you on a pedestal, little huntress, like the goddess you were named after. Now I'm thanking my lucky stars I've been given a second chance to love you more, not because you're perfect but because, like me, you have a few flaws in your character too.'

Although he spoke lightly and teasingly Diana detected the deeper throb of passion in his voice so that when his hand pulled at her hair, forcing her to raise her face, she was ready for his kiss. And as soon as his lips touched hers the sweet insidious warmth of desire spread through her, making her body go lax.

His mouth still against hers, Jason shifted position and pushed her back against the cushions on which she had lain so recently. She let her hands slide from his shoulders down over his back to pull his shirt free from the waistband of his pants and slip under the thin cotton stuff to caress the smooth skin.

'Does this mean you're going to stay with me, here in Quito, and share this crazy dream of mine about having a home and a couple of kids?' he asked, moving away from her a little so that he could see her.

'Since you've gone to all the trouble of buying this house for me I think I'd better stay,' she teased. 'Anyway, I'd much rather be here or anywhere else in the world *with* you than in London *without* you, even if you do spank me.'

'Oh, hell!' he groaned. 'Did I hurt you, darling? Let me look.'

His hand was at the hem of her dress, pushing it up. Putting her arms round his neck, Diana pulled his head down close to her again.

'It does hurt a little, but there's something you can do to make it hurt less,' she whispered, and her breath blew softly on his hair where it curved over his ear.

'And what is that?' he asked, pulling away from her again, his eyes blandly blue as he pretended innocence of her desire.

'Show me you love me, please, Jason, now.'

'If I do, will you promise to trust me when I have to go away without you or if I return to you a little behind schedule?' he challenged, his mouth tantalisingly close to hers.

'Oh, yes, yes, I promise all that. I've learned my lesson,' she cried, pressing herself urgently against him..

'I've learned a few myself,' he murmured with a touch of self-mockery. 'And I'll have to see if I can remember to leave you a note telling you where I've gone and why. Maybe you should buy a stock of pencils and paper pads. Leave one of each in every room of the house and then I'll have no excuse not to ...'

He was unable to say any more because Diana took the initiative, grasped two handfuls of his hair and pulled his face closer so that she could stop his mouth with her own. He responded immediately with the fierce possessiveness which had brought her so much pleasure that night in Puno so that when their combined passions reached their climax she had a lovely feeling of joy which comes from having been given something rather than of having had something taken from her.

Afterwards they sat quietly together in a room from which the sunlight had faded, holding hands in sweet contentment.

'Maria is very wise,' she said.

'What has that got to do with anything?' Jason asked lazily.

'She told me once that the best part of a quarrel is the making up afterwards. Now I know what it's like I agree with her. Don't you?'

'Oh, every time,' he replied with a laugh. 'But I'd prefer it if we could arrange to make up on the same day as we quarrel and not over fifteen months later. I don't want to go through hell again. Think you can remember that?'

'Oh yes, I'll remember,' she said. 'I'll remember because I love you yesterday, today and always.'

His eyes dark with emotion, he studied her face. Then his mouth quivered uncontrollably before he buried it in the softness of her hair where it was beginning to grow fluffy against her neck again.

'That's an awful lot of commitment for anyone to make,' he replied, his muffled voice a little unsteady.

'But you believe me, don't you? Jason, please say you believe me,' she whispered.

'I believe you because I feel the same way about you,' he said. 'It seems we've both gone through hell and high water during the past fifteen months, but now we've landed, safely.'

'Yes, we've landed safely,' she repeated, keeping to herself the fear that they might have been estranged for ever if her father had not persuaded her to come to Ecuador with him. 'And now I think we'd better go and tell Chris I won't be flying home with him tomorrow.'

'No need,' he said, raising his head and laughing down at her. 'He knows. I told him when I saw him this afternoon.'

'You were so sure?' Diana gasped with a purely feminist reaction to such male arrogance when she recalled her own uncertainty since he had left her in Puno.

'I was sure of this, that no matter what you said to me or how you hurt me I was never going to give you another chance to stop being my wife,' he retorted fiercely, his hands bruising her shoulders as he pulled her up against him. 'Never, never, never—and don't you dare to forget it!'

His mouth came down on hers possessively and she felt happiness, so long a stranger, return and fill her whole being with its warmth.